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Building Civic Architecture in Cyberspace:

Digital civic spaces and the people who create them

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Submitted in partial fulfillment for the PhD in Science and Innovation Policy at
SPRU (Science and Technology Policy Research), University of Sussex

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Submission: April 2014

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

Summary

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Submitted for the award of the degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Building Civic Architecture in Cyberspace: Digital civic spaces and the people who create them

At the same time as we are seeing ever increasing numbers of people actively using social networking sites, and growing evidence of increased participation in campaigning and digital activism, we are seeing a decline in democratic participation in the UK at both a national and local level. This thesis examines these two contrasting effects within the context of Local Government in the UK and explores what the impact might be at the neighbourhood level. The work discusses the influence of place based online activity on democratic decision-making Local Government and the ways in which traditional processes of decision-making, democratic participation and community engagement practice may need to change to reflect the upward pressure that is being exerted by citizen use of new technologies and adjust the way in which Local Government facilitates citizen participation in decision-making. The work develops the concept of Digital civic space as an alternative to eParticipation platforms and discusses how such spaces are being used to connect online activity with democratic processes at present and how present experience may be used to inform future developments. Employing an Action Research method, the research analyses three projects in order to examine the nature of the pre-existing participation online and the impact of creating online civic spaces to connect the participants both to each other and to local decision-makers. Design criteria are proposed which describe the necessary qualities of public-ness, openness, co-production, definition of place and identity and the thesis reaches conclusions as to how these criteria might better connect local residents with the democratic decision-making processes for their communities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Until we rebuild, both from the bottom up and from the top down, our institutes of governance and democracy, we will not be able to stand up to the fundamental challenges that we are facing. (Castells, 2001, p. 282)

The lives of citizens in developed countries such as the UK, are becoming increasingly influenced by the availability and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the Internet. The recent growth of Internet-based technologies and services, such as Facebook and Twitter, mean that people's online activity is as likely to be social as transactional. While Government is debating whether or not to allow individual staff to communicate directly with the public using these new technologies, citizens are using social technologies to hold online conversations about their communities, largely independently of formal democratic institutions and elected representatives. This research is informed by an examination of numerous examples of civic activity online ranging from parish council websites, to sites such as Buckshaw Village Forum¹ - an online forum created by a villager before the creation of this new town was actually completed. One of the central concerns of this thesis is whether democratic processes need to change to take account of these new online spaces and if so, what form should these changes take.

As a technologist and a community engagement specialist in local government in the UK, I have observed and experienced the increase in civic participation online, and the struggle within local government to adapt to the accompanying changes in

¹ <http://forum.buckshaw.org> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

citizens' behaviour. This experience has been accumulated in the context of a wider concern about lack of participation in local democracy or democratic deficit (see section 2.7). This thesis examines the ways in which digital technologies are being used by communities to communicate and to organise civic activities and how they might be used to affect participation in democratic decision-making within defined and, in many cases, relatively small, local areas.

Local online activities, referred to as 'hyperlocal' by many practitioners, create public content and illuminate networks which previously were generally inaccessible to external scrutiny. This provides the opportunity to explore and understand local communities from a new perspective. This research examines how these online spaces potentially relate to local democracy, and discusses the literature on community engagement and participation. It analyses the challenges and opportunities that new forms of community participation bring to local government and civic participation.

This research examines these community-run websites, using the concept of digital civic spaces, a notion that draw on ideas about virtual space as proposed by Mitchell (Mitchell, 1995), and argues that they are becoming online successors or companions of town squares or town halls. Chapter 4 proposes a set of design criteria for these spaces based on the intersection of the literatures related to three main fields:

- Political communication and specifically the impact of the Internet and social websites and tools on political and democratic debate;
- Online community and social behaviours;

- Community activism and engagement and specifically the theory of co-production.

This thesis research seeks to extend this literature and to propose a design for a future digital civic space.

Central to the argument in this thesis is the need to re-examine the issue of democratic deficit (see section 2.7) in the context of the social and behavioural changes demonstrated in our use of new technologies, in order to understand the upward pressure that these changes exert on current structures and processes of democracy. In this thesis, the term ‘democratic process’ refers to the processes of liberal representative democracy, while ‘democratic’ describes the system of government within which the people can be said to rule with some sort of political equality (Held, 2006, p. 1). Any variations of the democratic model that emerged during the fieldwork for this thesis research are considered beyond the scope of experimentation though are discussed as a potential future area of enquiry in Chapter 7.

1.1 Emergence of the Network Society

Social media, and the related term Web 2.0,² describe a set of technologies that enable users to create, distribute and discuss online content, and to create and

² ‘Web 2.0’ is a term suggested by O’Reilly (O’Reilly, 2005) distinguish the new more participative Internet tools and websites from ‘Web 1.0’ tools which comprised the initial World Wide Web environment. O’Reilly describes Web 2.0 in terms of its difference from Web 1.0 (and previous technology environments) contrasting the hierarchical and broadcast nature of Web 1.0 with the distributed and participative nature of Web 2.0.

cultivate networks of connections comprising friends, family, acquaintances or, simply, like-minded people. Collectively these technologies can be described as the 'social web', a term first coined by Rheingold in 1996.³ One of the most significant attributes of the social web is the ability to empower individuals to become content creators, and to build their own sites and online spaces without the need for an intermediary and with little or no technical help. It has become a common argument of the scholarly community that this shift in the control of the tools of media creation and distribution along with the social nature of that distribution, is influencing social changes which are altering the distribution of power, and empowering individuals who want to challenge the status quo (Blumler and Coleman 2001; Boyd and Ellison 2008; Castells 2001).

While the above cited works examine the effects of these digital networked technologies there is a distinction between authors such as Castells and Wellman who argue for the emergence of a Network Society, and authors such as Boyd and Jenkins who more generally discuss the effects that emerge from a socially networked society. The persistent growth in the adoption of these technologies means that they are becoming a significant aspect of local as well as global communication and community; the specific concern of this thesis is to examine these socially networked technologies in the context of their likely impact on local government and their potential as a medium for local civic action.

³ <http://rheingold.com/social-media/> (Retrieved 19th April 2013)

One of the pre-eminent growth areas of Internet technologies is social websites and services that seek to create peer-to-peer social experiences as their primary or supporting purpose. A recent study states that “A remarkable rise in social networking with nearly half (49%) of all Internet users having up-dated or created a social networking profile in the last year, up from 17% in 2007” (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009, p. 5). This sharp upward increase contrasts with the steady growth in all other areas of Internet use. The same study goes on to say:

The significance of the Internet was also apparent in its value for communication and social networking. Internet users believed that the Internet enabled them both to reinforce their communication with their families and existing social networks, but also to meet new people, some of whom they go on to meet face to face⁴. In 2009, 38% of Internet users had met someone on the Internet they did not know before, most commonly on social networking sites, but also through email, messaging or chat rooms. (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009: 5)

In February 2012, 83.5% of the UK adult population had access to the Internet – which was a decrease of 224,000 adults who had not used the Internet since 2011 Q3, following a decrease of 299,000 between Q2 and Q3 of the same year (“Statistical Bulletin Internet Access Quarterly Update ,” 2012). According to OFCOM, in April 2012, 51% of adults online were using social networking sites - an increase from the 40% figure for October 2011. In its 2011 study, the Oxford Internet Institute described an emerging type of ‘Next Generation’ Internet users:

Specifically, we operationally define the next generation user as someone who uses at least two internet applications (out of four applications queried) on their mobile or who fits two or more of the following criteria:

⁴ This reference to the connection between online and offline echoes the observations of Rheingold (1988), one of the first people to consider the offline implications of our online communities (Rheingold, 1998)REMOVE REFERENCE FROM THE END OF THIS NOTE.

they own a tablet, own a reader, own three or more computers. By this definition 44.4% of internet users in Britain were next generation users (Dutton & Blank, 2011, p. 4)

Adoption of new technologies and the associated changes is not universal. In 2009, 73% of households in the UK were online ("Communications Market Report 2012," 2012) and there is growing concern about groups who are digitally excluded through lack of access to the Internet (Helsper, 2008), and groups who are not able or not interested in going online or are only using the Internet on a transactional basis rather than for social contact or content creation. Nevertheless, in numerous demographic groups, take-up of the Internet and social use of it have been consistently increasing ("Communications Market Report 2012," 2012; Dutton & Blank, 2011; Dutton et al., 2009) and this is providing the basis for treating this change as more than a passing trend or fad.

Participation online can take a variety of forms and an individual's 'social' use of the Internet can include a range of behaviours beyond the creation of content. Research from the market research organisation, Forrester, suggests that 15% of people who are online and active in social networking sites, create substantial amounts of content (Li & Bernoff, 2008), and Dutton (Dutton et al., 2009) finds similar levels of active content. Roles and behaviours online that constitute the majority of Internet participation (in the sense of Jenkins' (Jenkins, 2006) description of a participatory culture where socially connected members consider content creation and collaboration to be central to interactions - see Ch. 2 section

2.5) can include content sharing, commenting or the 'likes'⁵ related to a Facebook post. These participatory acts are important and indicate levels of support or interest in a particular view, in a dynamic and public way.

Dutton and Blank (Dutton & Blank, 2011) suggest that the translation of Internet use from a fixed PC to new tablet devices and mobile Internet use, that is more personal and portable devices, is an indication that the growth of social and networked behaviours will continue. The 'next generation users' who are employing these portable devices are embedding the use of technology in many different aspects of their lives. Its use is no longer limited to a fixed location terminal, but instead is always available through a phone or tablet. This, along with increasing use of the Internet for social as well as transactional purposes, provides opportunities for new forms of participation and content creation.

Some social scientists argue that these new communication and network technologies, of which hyperlocal web spaces are one manifestation, have an effect beyond the creation of online communities or the translation of offline social interactions into online communities (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Castells, 2009, 2011; Hampton & Wellman, 2001). These authors argue that we are in a transition between the late 20th century post Industrial Society and a new Network Society whose defining feature is the power and possibilities created by networks created between individuals and groups.

⁵ One of the simplest interactions on the social web is to 'Like' a Facebook post - indicating approval, agreement or at least appreciation of the content.

This thesis examines Network Society theories in the context of hyperlocal activity (see Ch. 3 section 3.7) and explores the pressure this might bring to bear on some of the most traditional and formal structures of our society –the democratic process and government institutions – at the local as opposed to the national level. Rather than examining the efforts of government to digitise services and relationships, which is the focus of eParticipation research (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2006a; Macintosh, 2006b; Pratchett, 2006; Pratchett et al., 2009), this thesis examines the impact of social technologies, such as forums, blogs and pages on services such as Facebook, on civic participation, their implications for political communication and the potential changes that will be required to our decision-making processes in order to accommodate these technologies. It examines the potential of the new digital civic spaces for responding to the democratic requirement to engage in public debate about current affairs, and matters of policy and politics. Whilst such debate can be found on community websites and in other hyperlocal spaces, it does not follow that it is connected to or engaged with in decision-making processes.

Online spaces are both social and technological constructs, and are formed by the people who use them and the content and narratives that they create, as well as by the technology that underpins them (Boyd, 2010). This thesis examines these new digital civic spaces in the context of their relevance to local democracy in the UK.

1.2 Local government is in a state of flux

Local government in many ways is the most visible arm of Government in the United Kingdom, and is responsible for such day-to-day services as waste collection and parking charges. It is recognised as such, and is considered by the public as having more impact on their everyday lives than parliament (“Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report,” 2011, p. 97). This thesis research was conducted against a backdrop of seismic shifts in the UK local democratic landscape. This started with the 2008 credit crunch and includes the election of a new coalition government in 2010 whose first Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) led to some councils facing budget cuts of 30% over three years. These events combined with an aggressive, but inconsistent ‘Localism agenda’.⁶ Its stated objective was to devolve power to local government, but it also retained or returned powers to central government as part of the renegotiation of areas of responsibility. In addition, there was government’s publicly stated increased commitment to openness and transparency (backed by funding for the creation of an Open Data Institute) and the ‘Big Society’.⁷

⁶ The Localism Agenda refers to the body of policy promoted by the 2010 UK Coalition Government which outlines ways in which power might be further devolved beyond Westminster. The Localism Act (given Royal Assent in November 2011) codifies some elements of this, but the effects of this policy initiative are subject to debate.

⁷ The Big Society is a central plank of Conservative party policy and refers to a desire to pass more direct power to communities, including those parts that involve charitable or third sector activities, to allow them to take greater responsibility for the services within their communities. This policy is distinct, but is related to the Localism Agenda, which is directed almost entirely at governmental institutions.

This thesis explores the contrasts between local government and the networked and social public described in the previous section, and argues that the process of local government is currently mismatched with the online behaviours. For example, the previous administration (Blair's and then Brown's New Labour Governments from 1997-2005) emphasized performance metrics and councils being measured against a number of national indicators. Most of these indicators have been removed; however, the processes that were designed to deliver them largely remain in place. This is one example of the contradiction between the conversational and networked culture of the Social Web⁸ with its metrics of connection and casual conversation online, and the way councils are organised, and the potential disruption caused when councils seek to use social media beyond their communications departments.

At the time of writing local government in the UK was subject to a number of competing pressures to change; a new Localism Bill was being enacted which makes devolves greater power to the neighbourhood level particularly with respect to neighbourhood planning, and new forms of governance were being debated. Fiscal pressures and the 2010 coalition government's deficit reduction plan have begun to reduce the size of the state at local level. This potentially could drive fundamental changes to the services provided by local government and the way they are delivered. The additional pressure to change wrought by increased expectations around the use of technology has meant many local government officers and elected representatives have started to consider how to use the social

⁸ The term Social Web refers to networked technologies which enable social behaviours such as content creation, sharing and comment as well as accrual of connections and 'friends'.

web not just for communication purposes but as a way to create a more effective relationship with the public - using the removal of state services as an opportunity to create greater opportunities for direct participation in service delivery and decision-making by citizens. These opportunities may have the potential to change the relationship between citizen and state and, perhaps, to increase levels of democratic participation.

These changes will not occur in isolation; they will be affected by broader behaviour changes such as the increased participation on online communities and social networks. The perspective adopted in this thesis is that there is a need to consider policies and a robust attendant online architecture, as well as the effect of the current 'patchy' creation of hyperlocal sites and the effects of a wider social shift that the growing numbers of these websites might herald. Chapter 7 discusses the evidence for these changes and examines potential responses to them.

1.3 Opportunities for new kinds of participation

While technology offers many opportunities for the redesign of services, this thesis is concerned with the potential impact of the rise of a social and networked society on the ability of citizens to participate democratically in local government decision-making. From the perspective of local government, there is an interest in whether new technologies can help to address what is commonly seen as a democratic deficit in participation (see Ch. 2 section 2.7), characterised by citizens decreasing engagement with the formal democratic process, in all measurable ways ("Audit of Political Engagement 7: The 2010 Report," 2010).

As is occurring with participation at the national level, new technologies might enable future participation in local democracy taking the form of an active public sphere (Habermas, 1962; Outhwaite, 1994), a transformed media landscape (Castells, 2009; Dutton, 2007; Shirky, 2008; Sunstein, 2001) or new types of activism (Karpf, 2010b; Shulman, 2009). There is a contrary, more sceptical position that argues that new technologies are unlikely to substantively change the ways in which governments function or the ways that citizens choose to interact with it (Morozov, 2011). The central interest in this thesis is examining the new forms of civic participation described here, and exploring how these connect with and affect democratic decision-making as well as participation in the democratic process. The act of citizen participation in democracy is discussed throughout this thesis as a necessary element of a functioning democracy since, without this participation, trust is diminished, decisions are not scrutinised and citizens do not gain a sophisticated view of the actions needed to govern, leaving a representative system of democracy in a weakened state (Blumler & Coleman, 2009). There are many reasons for lack of participation, but it is of profound concern to anyone who believes in the importance of democratic decision-making that there are greater levels of participation in reality TV shows than in the national process of voting for political representatives (Coleman, 2006). The nature of participation in these two activities is very different, and the simple degree of attention required for voting in a reality TV context cannot be compared with the degree of attention required for political participation.

New technology, in the form of eParticipation or eDemocracy, is seen as one potential solution to the democratic deficit problem. The design of services and websites has developed to help government to provide tools that facilitate democratic engagement. It can be argued that previous analyses of so called eParticipation (Macintosh, Whyte, & Renton, 2004; Macintosh, 2004; Smith, Macintosh, & Millard, 2009) are flawed. They consider democratic engagement from a techno-determinist point of view with services and access designed and controlled by government as currently formed, rather than being influenced by societal changes. It is suggested also that this would require government to have a more profound relationship with the technologies that shape the online environment (Lessig, 2006).

Central to this examination of whether it is more useful to look to the activities of citizens rather than government, to address the issue of democratic deficit, is the concept of co-production and its importance for community engagement and interaction (Bovaird, 2005; Boyle, Coote, Sherwood, & Slay, 2010; Putnam, 2000) and appropriateness as a bridge between traditional offline democratic engagement and the online world. Co-production has emerged from the literature on and practice of citizen engagement and consultation. Its significance is that it is more about describing the relationships and relative power states of the actors than a mandated process, and is defined in the following quote:

Co-production emerged in the social sciences nearly four decades ago. The idea was first articulated by the 2009 Nobel prize winner for economics, Elinor Ostrom, and her team at Indiana University, who coined the term 'co-production' in a series of studies of the Chicago police in the 1970s. Ostrom was trying to explain why the wholesale adoption of centralised service

delivery through large institutions was less effective than people had predicted. She needed a word to convey what was missing when the police abandoned their close involvement with the public on the beat, and became more distantly involved in patrol cars: it was that element of successful policing that only members of the public could provide to make sure services worked. It was Ostrom's team who defined co-production as the "process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not 'in' the same organisation. (M. Harris & Boyle, 2009, p. 13)

Co-production is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, which argues that social and economic changes support greater levels of co-production within the practice of community engagement, and that this, in turn, puts pressure on traditional processes of representation to reform in order to accommodate a different kind of relationship between citizen and state.

The question at the centre of this thesis is what effect, if any, growth in the take-up and range of uses of the social web might have on the democratic deficit and the relationship between citizen and state. This question is derived not just from the perspective that communication is an increasingly online activity, but from the participatory nature of the online environment and whether this creates a suitable context to address lack of participation in the democratic process. By examining an arena where people are increasingly more active is it possible to learn anything about an arena where the public is increasingly less active?

1.4 The social web and civic networks: Linking local community and co-production concepts

Co-production activity in the form civic groups and networks has always existed within local communities, for example neighbourhood watch groups, church

groups, sports clubs and parent teacher associations, and these groups have established relationships with local government. This thesis explores the nature of the new forms of civic groups and networks in the form of hyperlocal websites, which in some cases encompass these 'traditional' groups. The research described in Chapter 6 looks at new connections between these hyperlocal sites and the literature on community engagement. In some cases, participants use social media to include elements of local news blogging or campaigning, and these sites are attracting a new group of civic participants. This hyperlocal activity takes place on the public, shared platforms that Boyd (Boyd, 2010, p. 1) describes as "Networked Publics... simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice."

It also takes place in more discrete and bounded blogs, forums and websites created by participants. Chapter 4 discusses how these hyperlocal sites could be considered digital civic space spaces and explores their potential relationship with local government.

In early discussions, online community was considered primarily in the context of communities of interest with communities of place given secondary consideration because of the dispersed nature of early Internet take up. When the online community interacts with physical communities the implications increase, but these can only be explored when sufficient numbers of residents are online (Bruns, Wilson, & Saunders, 2008; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005). One of the purposes of this research is to examine what

happens when the concepts and effects of the Network Society are connected to specific local geography, and there are incentives for participation in these communities in order to communicate with one's community of place. For the growing numbers of people participating online it is the potential of these social sites and services to affect what happens offline in local communities that is of interest, and which are examined in this thesis.

Hampton's and Wellman's study of 'Netville' (Hampton & Wellman, 2001) examine this connection and the impact of networked technologies on geographically defined areas – on neighbourhoods – and describe the effect as 'glocalisation' in which online take-up has reached a critical mass. Glocalisation is occurring wherever the Internet is having the communication effects at local level previously seen at the global level and Hampton talks about:

Adoption of the Internet for local communication within a local setting may vary on the basis of the ecological constraints of the environment. However, there is virtually no existing research on the relationship between ecological contexts and media use. Whereas an extensive sociological literature exists on neighborhood or contextual effects, from a communication perspective the role of ecological context remains relatively unexplored. In fact, within the literature on contextual effects, there is an implicit assumption that social contact operates through only one channel; that is, meaningful social interaction takes place only through in-person contact. This is problematic for both the study of space and the study of media: Studies of the Internet often ignore the role of physical place and context in everyday life, and studies of ecological context often ignore that a variety of media (old and new) can be used to form and maintain social ties. The result has been a failure to explore the possibility that some media likely afford social contact at different rates within different ecological contexts, which may influence inequalities derived from social interaction. (Hampton, 2010, p. 4)

The main findings from Hampton's research point to the idea that access to technology has a positive impact on civic participation. However, he also highlights the dangers of this additional connectedness being focused on the articulate middle class, and draws attention to an additional concern related to the impact of the digital divide – though he points out that disadvantaged communities in Canada are going online at a faster rate than other communities. Hampton's overall conclusion is one of hope of seeing a positive effect in terms of social cohesion and collective action within neighbourhoods.

Nevertheless, Hampton tempers this by pointing out that it is a limited study and that the i-Neighbours effect may not be generalizable. This thesis supports the idea that hyperlocal activism can have a positive effect on local communities and that this effect is available also to less advantaged community members. Hampton starts by describing the effects of online/offline networked interactions. This is essential for a consideration of the effects of the online social networking tools being used by local communities which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

There is a distinction in both analysis and effect between community and networks. Castells suggests the distinction that communities are built on shared values while networks are built on shared objectives (Castells, 2007). Castells emphasises the effect of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) in providing connections or bridges between more closely linked groups within a network, that virtual networks create, in terms of their ability to provide information flows between different groups. He describes "...the fact that most ties people have are "weak ties" does not mean that they are unimportant. They are sources of information, of

work performance, of leisure, of communication, of civic involvement, and of enjoyment.” (Castells, 2001, p. 128)

Wellman and Gulia (Wellman & Gulia, 1999) propose that these weak ties provide the means to build social connections across diverse interests, and increase the sharing of values and beliefs. They see virtual community as a way of reversing what Castells suggests is a declining trend of community in localities. Castells (Castells, 2001, p. 131) discusses this slightly different understanding, and refers to a rise in individualism, and networked individualism as manifesting “a social pattern, not a collection of isolated individuals”. It can be argued that networks and networked technologies can help form community both globally and locally and it is perhaps not surprising that community engagement practitioners, who spend their time trying to encourage and facilitate participation, are excited about the fact that they can see the ‘bottom up’ participation potential of hyperlocal sites.

This thesis examines some of the implications of the manifestation of online communities within localities, and explores the local digital civic spaces that are emerging or might emerge, comparing engagement with these new online environments with more traditional forms of engagement. Hyperlocal civic activity is currently a fragile and nascent environment, but if it continues to grow, then it is reasonable to consider the role it might play in local decision-making. Chapter 7 moves the discussion forward by positioning these sites as both a form of informal civic activity that sees the community self-organising, and a more formal civic activity which connects the community to formal decision-making. The definitions

of informal and formal activity are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 in the context of investigating civic activity that is independent of the state.

Hyperlocal content and activity vary; they might include local blogs documenting everyday happenings in a village, a Facebook group updating people about activity in the village high street, online community message boards that enable residents to discuss local issues without the need to meet formally, or specific campaigns about local issues that are relevant to the locality. The content can range from the quirky to the practical, and the motivations and skills on display vary hugely. Also, as discussed in Chapter 6, the tone of the content can differ greatly - from more formal media language to the language of democratic debate. These content differences contributed to the confusion surrounding Government's response to the social media activity during the 2011 unrest, and also, as the findings in Chapter 5 show, cause difficulties for local government officers faced with deciding what is an 'acceptable' contribution to democratic debate – an issue that is discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.2).

The increased adoption of social web technology means that the online world that is being built in many ways mirrors the offline world. However there are important and substantial differences (Castells, 2001; Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2008). As hyperlocal activity emerges it is being claimed as both a new manifestation of the media, the fourth estate, and as a publicising of pre-existing civic activism and community. In some respects hyperlocal sites can be seen simply as older means enabled by new technologies (e.g. a Parish Council website could be considered an innovation in technology use rather than a change to the Parish Council). However,

I argue that the collapse of context that is facilitated by these new technologies (see Ch. 2 section 2.5.2) requires this new activity to be examined in the context of social change, and not seen as an extension to pre-existing critiques of political communication or community engagement theory. This is discussed in more detail when I expand on the role of other channels for expression and participation in Chapter 3.

1.5 The role of the media

It has been argued that the process of public mind formation has shifted from government to the realm of mass media communication (Castells, 2007, 2009). Thus, we need to examine what it means if mass media is failing, at least within local democracy, to provide a sense of the 'public mind' that is needed to connect decision makers to the public. Discussion of where the 'public mind' is located is central to discussions about how to address falling levels of participation in the formal political process. Mass media have always to some extent been the embodiment of the public mind. The new social technologies and the self-publishing that is enabled by these tools mean that the public mind is no longer under the control of the professional news industry. This has a number of distinct effects; for example, the disintermediation effect of being able to self-publish directly results in more voices being heard, even if the voices that are listened to are from the same groups that dominated print media (Hindman, 2009). There are new means for being heard - by peers and others - which did not previously exist.

Habermas describes the public mind as the 'public sphere' - a shared public conversation which encapsulates the political, social and cultural (Finlayson, 2005). He argues that this public sphere is essential for the functioning of society since it provides the required guidance and identity. Habermas's public sphere in many ways is an idealisation of debate in that it is a 'pure' exchange of ideas - it is an informal instrument of debate which also supports the political process. There is a tension between the state and the public sphere with respect to the power they wield over each other, and it could be argued that it is this tension that is being affected by the increase in self-publication and communication brought by the social web. Boyd's description of 'Networked Publics' proposes an environment for these public conversations within the context of the Network Society, and for communities to come together. Boyd's work also includes a focus on the social interactions within communities as opposed to Habermas's intellectualised idea of the national public.

Access to information is one of the cornerstones of the public sphere (Habermas 1992) and connects the concept of public sphere to an information or Network Society analysis. The pervasive nature of information in a Network Society offers the potential for the public sphere to thrive online. Freedom of access to information is intertwined with a requirement for individual privacy; the increased 'public-ness' in which we live effects our sense of identity (Boyd, 2007b; Turkle, 1997) as well as our rights as citizens to be informed and involved.

Examination of the public sphere at the local level requires consideration about its affecting the likelihood of debate between people who are interacting socially and

civically, as well as in the context of political debate. As the local media are weakened and reduced in size, hyperlocal sites are taking over some of their role in shaping local discourse. These hyperlocal spaces cannot be described as mere extensions of media discourse and the public mind because they are also social and organisational environments. The creators of these spaces are as likely to be using these sites to organise community activities or campaigns as to report and comment on local affairs. I argue that these hyperlocal spaces are being underestimated if they are seen as spaces 'claimed' for public discourse; they also provide a place for public action in the form of community organisation.

1.6 Practical examination and primary research

The literature and theories discussed above identify a number of areas that warrant further investigation. While the field of eGovernment has developed to focus on national and global online democracy, scant attention has been paid so far to the local or hyperlocal context. Changing online and offline democratic behaviour, and the lack of research on the relationship between the two in the local context, identify a range of questions about how new technology can best support engagement in civic matters. Developments in media reporting, community engagement and content creation beg the question of the ideal conditions to support civic participation online, and what can be learnt from offline environments.

This work examines new forms of civic participation and the potential interface with democratic decision-making and the democratic process. It explores the gap

between the literature on community engagement and political communication. The empirical part of this work involves three projects undertaken using an action research approach. The objective was to examine the nature of hyperlocal communities and test different ways of interacting with them within the context of creation of new digital civic spaces. The first project, the Virtual Town Hall, includes four local authorities, and was an attempt to create a council sponsored civic space (see Ch. 5 for method and Ch. 6 (section 6.1) for results). The second project - a series of systematic audits of local civic activity, was informed by the research on the first project, and investigates how the community participants to populate that space (the Virtual Town Hall) are identified (see Ch. 4 for method and Ch. 5 (section 5.2) for results). The third project uses the data gathered from one of these audits, conducted in Cambridgeshire, and examines whether it is possible to engage actively with the networks that were discussed found by this audit to form an effective community engagement strategy with respect to the creation of a new local approach to the creation of renewable energy infrastructure (see Ch. 4 for method and Ch. 5 (section 5.3) for results).

The choice of methodology (discussed in Ch. 4) was based on my position as both a practitioner and a researcher; I was instrumental in planning and implementing the projects at the different sites and the software environment supporting them. This required constant attention to balance in my approach and my perspective, and I used an action research method (see Ch. 4) to ensure that the results reported are useful to the client, but also have academic integrity. This is an unusual perspective, but as our digital activities become increasingly integral with our lives this kind of balance is becoming a more common requirement. In this

thesis I reflect on what this blending of professional identities might mean for other researchers.

The ultimate aim of this research is to examine whether it is possible systematically to find and describe informal civic participation online and to explore its potential to increase participation in local democracy. There are well understood and well established democratic decision-making processes in the UK which are coming under increasing pressure as a result of the ways that people are using new technology, not just to connect with friends and family, but to organise at community and issue levels. This pressure is particularly acute at the local government level where so many of the services that affect our daily lives are designed and managed. This thesis examines the point of connection between this informal civic participation and pre-existing instruments of decision-making and democracy. It describes the new digital civic spaces and starts to explore some of the new approaches that will be needed to facilitate this relationship in the future.

1.7 Digital civic space

This thesis examines new kinds of public space which are created and shaped by the participatory tools of the social web. Online space is created as much by the content it contains and the people that populate as by the code that describes it (Ellison & Boyd, 2008; Lessig, 2006). Chapter 6 documents some of the digital civic spaces which smaller communities are forming. I argue that these types of spaces, created by citizens (referred to as civic creators, discussed in more detail in Ch. 4, section. 4.5), are needed in order to create a suitable environment for citizens to

interact with government in the online realm and to ensure that citizens and government interact with each other in a meaningful way.

The term 'civic activity' is used to describe actions and interactions which connect individuals to their community. Community is used in its broadest sense to encompass any group beyond the immediate social and familial circle, which the individual considers himself or herself to be part of. In the present thesis, civic usually refers to communities of place, and membership is to some extent defined by residence, but also encompasses communities of interest which are situated within a defined geography (e.g. a local history group).

Throughout this thesis, the term 'informal civic participation' is used to describe the growing use of social media to communicate about civic issues within hyperlocal websites and also as 'engaged' individuals. It is used to characterise the civic content that contributes to the formation of these digital civic spaces. Chapter four provides a detailed definition of the term and its measurement, and situates it within a framework that describes the point at which this informal activity connects to the formal world of government. In drawing these distinctions between formal and informal activities and between civic and democratic actions, I depart from the purely social uses of social media and more public and civic uses. The literature on online activism is discussed in Chapter 3 and focuses on the effects of this activism at the local level – within the communities in which people live. Chapter 4 defines civic participation as a measurable set of activities which describe a new usage of social websites.

1.8 Conclusion

The emergence of a more networked society in conjunction with the changes to local government and the growth of a democratic deficit in the UK provide the background to this work. To examine how the social web is manifested in local communities and to demonstrate how the public is already creating digital civic space online, I address three main questions:

1. Can we consistently find online activity within defined geographic locations that is both informal and civic?
2. Can we create a digital civic space that brings together these civic creators in a single shared conversation?
3. What are the specific qualities of that space which are influential in terms of bringing about a good democratic experience?

The pace of change in the digital environment tends to suggest that things ‘just happen’. The viral and rapid nature of information exchange can suggest that new ideas or behaviours just emerge. However, this is not the case. Every service or experience online is designed with a greater or lesser amount of skill, and every piece of content is there because someone decided to create it and upload it.

Government has been largely passive in this process and has created platforms and services that mimic participation in traditional offline processes (Macintosh et al., 2004) rather than creating services that respond to the underlying social changes enabled by the use of new technologies. This assertion is explored in more detail in the empirical part of the research, and considered in the context of design of the

digital civic space in Chapter 4. This work examines whether Government has participated sufficiently widely in the more discursive and participative elements of the social web taking account of public discussion of civic and political issues online. There are weaknesses in online debate, for example, the fact that anonymity of effective campaigning sites can undermine the representativeness of the debate or a lack of accurate and trusted information can mean that the public are debating the wrong topic because a local newspaper has reported it in a certain way. The results of the empirical work reported in Chapter 5 suggest that debate of local issues is increasing online and that this online activity is likely to show public reactions to an event or an idea online before that reaction is seen offline.

A better understanding of the creation of digital civic spaces online may be one way to address these weaknesses and form the necessary environment and understanding for government to use the social web to connect to citizens. This potential is dependent on the public's being ready to be actively involved to avoid the risk of repeating the mistakes of a technologically deterministic eParticipation approach. It is important also to avoid undermining collaborative community projects that are already underway. Any digital civic space that is created should be better focused on connecting and supporting community groups and should, therefore, be designed to accommodate the fact that many people want to be more active citizens, rather than passive consumers of services. However, they want to do this by exploiting the new opportunities and behaviours provided by the Network Society ("Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report," 2011; Gibson, Williamson, & Ward, 2010; Williamson, Korris, Fallon, Allen, & Wilkinson, 2011). The role of these digitally active citizens (referred to as civic creators

throughout this thesis) is part of the empirical study described both Chapter 4 as part of the process of the creation of digital civic space and in Chapter 7 in a discussion of the results of the empirical work.

Chapter 2: Theoretical background

This chapter provides the theoretical foundations for the research questions addressed in this work, and set out the criteria for the digital civic space design proposed in Chapter 4. It addresses the following:

- 1) establishing a position with regard to the various claims made about the relevance or potential significance of the online interactions that provide a foundation for Digital civic space. Situating these interactions within more general concepts such as Habermas's public sphere, the potential emergence of the Network Society and a discussion of the nature of identity online. This addresses aspects of the process of social change with respect to the democratic process and behaviours;
- 2) outlining the features and relevant discussion of representativeness and democracy in order to advance my argument about how digital civic spaces might address the 'problem' or issue of democratic deficit.

The next chapter further develops the theoretical background review in two main areas:

- 1) providing an evaluation and critical discussion of government led efforts to activate or mobilise a specific vision of online public engagement, stemming partially from efforts to directly translate offline qualities into online qualities and partially from desire to control or at least moderate the implicit competition represented by 'ground up' initiatives;

- 2) to examine the literature describing specific practices of ‘ground up’ initiatives and the original activities related to online communities of interest and geography in order to inform the development of the design criteria presented in Chapter 4.

2.1 Is this the Network Society?

Chapter 1 discussed evidence from various studies chronicling the growth in take-up of social media and digital communications in the UK. This growing adoption of Internet technologies and their increasing pervasiveness demonstrated in the growth of mobile computing,⁹ provides the backdrop to on-going debate on the significance of these behaviour changes, and analysis of the social change signified by this growth in their use. The take up of these technologies is now sufficiently extensive to allow an examination of the impact of these technologies as an explicit local phenomenon. While local take-up of networked technology has been explored by several scholars, in particular Hampton and Wellman (Hampton & Wellman, 2001), the effects of wide scale adoption of these technologies at local level is less well documented and has been less discussed.

It has been argued that the changes in how people interact are affecting mainstream social behaviour norms (Boyd, 2007b, 2008; Donath, 2007; Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Turkle, 1997, 2011). Several authors are proposing that this is signalling a wider social shift towards a ‘Network Society’ - in which the

⁹ The OFCOM (2012) Communication Market Report confirms 39% of adults in the UK now have a smartphone (up from 26% in the previous year) and reports parallel growth in the use of mobile data downloads.

connectedness of individuals in society is the most significant driver of changes to their interactions (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2001, 2009). Others suggest that these changes describe the development of a participatory or collaborative culture ((Heron & Reason, 1997; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold & Weeks, 2012; Shirky, 2010). While the long term impacts of these changes are yet to be understood, they can be seen to be affecting many different aspects of society than envisaged at their initial emergence, and within arguably elite groups defined by their access to equipment or education opportunities.

Several attempts have been made to define an epoch narrative with respect to the wide scale adoption by society of the Internet. As use of the Internet spread beyond its military and later academic origins (Naughton, 2000; Rheingold, 1993), references appeared to the 'Information Society' (Webster, 1995). The analysis in this thesis ranks the creation and sharing of information as the most significant effect of the new technological landscape, and suggests it is indicative of a wider social shift from a post-industrial society to a new information society. With the development of social technologies such as Facebook, Twitter and their predecessors, Castells, Wellman and others have developed this idea, arguing that the more significant the difference wrought by these technologies is their use to connect people rather than the exchange in information. They consider the Network Society to be more appropriate than the information society. This analysis delves beneath the information currency of the Internet to examine the vastly increased, accessible and diverse networks in society. Castells's emphasis on the connection between people rather than information as the significant effect, demonstrates a social rather than a technocratic analysis: "his approach is one

which emphasises the connectedness of parts, though often these are in contradictory relationships, and their very frictional character is an important contributor to change” (Webster, 1995, p. 100).

In examining the impacts of social technologies in local communities, Wellman suggests that “Complex social networks have always existed, but recent technological developments in communication have afforded their emergence as a dominant form of social organization” (Wellman, 2001, p. 228). Networked technology allows disintermediation of the organisation of groups, which undermines the hierarchy both within and external to the group and questions the implications of this undermining within the fabric of local as well as global or national communities. Castells’s description of communities as essentially consisting of networks, and the interplay among physical and virtual communities in localities also defines network as the central element in his analysis, superseding the agency of individuals within that network. This gives the Network Society two different pedigrees – one from urban geography (Wellman) and one from sociology (Castells). In both cases the primary motivation for the label is the pre-eminence of the effect of the network within a given situation, and the emergence of a ‘network of networks’ where these effects can be documented in different contexts and at different scales.

2.2 Affordances of the social web

Looking beyond the general effects of a more digital and networked society is helped by a more directed examination of the design of the technology that enables

the wide spread of these effects. Affordances - the qualities of a design that allow the user to perform an action (Norman, 2002, p. 507) - describe the effect of specific design qualities on the user. For example, an item with the 'affordance' of transparency engenders transparent behaviour in the user. A specific instance of this is Facebook which has an affordance of 'publicness' meaning that, as an environment, it encourages publicity rather than privacy (Boyd 2008). The purpose of affordance and its resulting effect within the detailed design, are in the hands of the designer and creator of the object (in this case the website) and, in most cases, exist to serve a specific purpose. The purpose may or may not coincide with the purpose of the user in utilising that site or function, and there is the potential for mismatch between user and service provider. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 and is central to discussion of the use of social web tools for civic purposes.

The attributes of any environment contribute to the way people treat it and interact with it and with each other. In considering what might comprise a local civic space in terms of purpose and, therefore, affordances, a potential aim or purpose might be to bring together multiple communities to form a decision-making unit. However, for this quality of 'local civic space' to be realised, consideration must be given to the 'fit' between the technological architecture of the Internet and the network behaviours that are encouraged by the application design. It is not obvious that the social web offers a direct or immediate solution to achieving this fit. The affordances or qualities of the social web are oriented towards encouraging social interaction and the creation of networks through the sharing of content and connection. Social websites in the main pursue

commercial agendas as the primary intent of their the design, usually as a result of the sale of advertising or content. Such agendas have specific features that may not be entirely consistent with achieving other affordances. It is not just these technological qualities that suggest the social definition of the emergence of the Network Society but also the more far-reaching effects of earlier telecommunications developments.

Social web technologies have a number of common characteristics that fall into the broad categories of behavioural and technological qualities. There is an emphasis on the ability to share and aggregate content (behavioural), un-hierarchical data management that relies on tags and categorisation rather than structure (technological), and an ability for users to shape their own online experience rather than being passive recipients of information (behavioural). Underpinning these content sharing tools are public profiles and online identities on social networking sites through which this content is shared. It can be argued that this ability to share content directly and publicly with unlimited networks of people has altered the flow of information through society compared to pre-Internet communication models which relied either on the mass media or on more limited 'word of mouth' sharing through offline networks. More than simply enabling the more efficient flow of information via networks – a technological effect, the distinction between public and private content is also blurred by networked technologies; content that previously would have enjoyed limited distribution, for example, family photos, can potentially be shared openly – a behavioural change. These qualities are explored in more detail in Chapter 4 in the context of designing a digital civic space.

This changed information flow, and the ability of participants to shape their experience while using the new technologies, define the environment as co-productive. Co-production is a term used also to describe a different kind of relationship between citizen and government with a more equal distribution of power than in a hierarchical environment (Boyle et al., 2010) (Co-production in this and other contexts is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). In this context the term co-production describes a symbiotic relationship between site owners who create the code, and site users who create the content. However, without an understanding of the design affordances and intended purpose of the tools being used there continues to be potential for mismatch, or more positive unintended consequences, in using social web tools for civic or political purposes. These tools can disrupt the relationship between citizen and government in unintended ways.

2.3 The nature of influence in networks

Within the new environment of the social web and its analysis as a 'network of networks', new services and ideas are able to move swiftly, through increasingly connected communities. Rheingold discussed this in terms of an emergent effect of highly persistently connected groups and their impact on protest, and this effect continues to be seen (Rheingold, 2002). With respect to democratic participation, the focus of this thesis, Coleman sees the emergence of these networked groups as putting strain on the political party system:

In the Network Society, individuals may belong to many loosely tied associational chains that connect them to their social and occupational

worlds. A major consequence of the uprooting from the broad social influence of groups is that individuals have become more responsible for the production and management of their own social and political identities (Bang and Esmark 2009). This transformation of the relationship between individual and society places increasing strains on parties and governments to appeal to highly personalized political preferences that are more difficult to address, much less satisfy, than the broad group or class interests of an earlier era. (Coleman & Shane, 2011, p. 8688)

Hindman sees this as being less transformative and more as a widening of the public sphere and increased access to the decision-making elite with the technology amplifying the voice of the ordinary citizen (Hindman, 2009). Chadwick describes the uncertainty that comes from these networks colliding with the traditional, usually hierarchical, structures and outlines the central question as to how decision-making will operate in this networked environment with the simple question 'who governs, and who ought to govern?' (Chadwick, 2011).

At the more radical end of the spectrum of answers to these questions, Benkler (Benkler, 2006) explores manifestations of power, counter power and freedom and his work *The Wealth of Networks* clearly fixes his position within the ambit of Network Society thinkers. He contends that networks and individuals exert power, and uses the example of wikileaks to show how the Network Society has subverted traditional power structures. Counter power as described by Castells refers to the activity of resisting the imposition of power onto an individual – as distinct from freedom that allows one to exert one's own power (Castells, 2007). The manifestation of power within networks and the effect of this on community engagement theory are discussed in Chapter 3.

The effects of networked power on the traditional structures of decision-making are not clearly understood. However, one element of this understanding is the interplay between the networks and the technologies that are used to amplify their effects. Cutting off Internet connectivity did not 'resolve' the Egyptian Government's problems in late 2010 – and it caused a lot of economic and reputational damage at a time when that country's external relationships were as fraught as its internal ones and the effect had gone beyond the reach of the technology. For example, Gladwell (Gladwell, 2010) and Morozov (Morozov, 2011) are very clear that the online element played a small but significant role in this uprising and that there were many other factors involved in the emergence of the Arab Spring. However, it is possible to identify a network effect; networks empower people to act with the reassurance of 'safety in numbers'.

The 'mob' is not a new phenomenon, and television (or even radio - witness the response to the Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* broadcast) as a mass medium has had the effect of mobilising rapid responses to events. The publicness and immediacy of the connectedness enabled by networked technologies is new, and challenges traditional structures by the speed and openness of its behaviours. The personalisation of messaging via social media and the immediacy of response to plans being mobilized means that social networks may be more effective than passive media, such as television, for group organisation (Rheingold, 2002). It could be argued that better access to information about other countries and cultures, simpler and cheaper tools to enable wider discussion of that information and different sets of conclusions, all contributed to the Egyptian people feeling able to take a stand against their government; however, when the technology was

removed, the network effect – the empowerment – persisted. Within local communities and neighbourhoods, this network of networks cannot be described as an anonymous mob which arguably should make the impact of these networked effects more profound as they assume additional weight with respect to identity and representativeness as discussed in more detail below.

2.4 Culture and the Network Society

A general understanding has been reached that online environments and social networking sites, described as ‘networked publics’ (Boyd, 2010), create specific cultures and social mores. There are myriad social signals online, and we only beginning to understand and categorise them (Donath, 2007). Part of our understanding of the potential influence of digitally enabled social networks comes from examining online behaviour, the culture that it creates, and its differences with the offline culture.

Within online social spaces the social signals can be subtle and not necessarily obvious to new or inexperienced participants who may be oblivious to the social significance of the act of ‘retweeting’ on Twitter for example. In technical terms it means forwarding a tweet from someone you follow, to your followers – a simple information exchange. Boyd and Marwick (Marwick & Boyd, 2010) point to ten different motivations for this simple act, echoing the richness of non-verbal communication offline. This different understanding is a further point of distinction between the networked public and traditional structures.

As more people become active online, and social media becomes embedded in everyday life for significant numbers of people, it is possible to examine the emergence of an Internet culture with behavioural norms that are distinct from those we see offline and reflected in the design of traditional structures. Castells (Castells, 2011) describes Internet culture as four layered: techno-meritocratic, hacker, virtual communitarian, and entrepreneurial. Each layer is described as having a distinct heritage and characteristics. Alternatively Rheingold & Weeks (Rheingold & Weeks, 2012), and Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006), describe a 'participatory culture' which is one:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (Rheingold & Weeks, 2012, p. 113)

The creation of culture online is an expression of the reality of the emotional and intellectual impacts of online interactions on the individual, and the creation of 'self' online. The persistent connection to other people provided via social networking sites and other technologies, results in the view of 'self' being formed not just by what is said in passing, but by what has been said over the whole course of a relationship since this is accessible and part of the identity. There are

consequences to this change in the way we interact which can be said to affect people's relationships with their communities and, in the context of this work, with their democratic participation. The most significant of these is the issue of identity vs anonymity.

2.4.1 Online identity

Identity is a complex subject and not the main consideration in this thesis. However some discussion of online identity is relevant in order to identify some of the tensions between the online and offline contexts. Formal democratic participation in an offline context relies on authenticated identity, for example, in the case of voting. This contrasts with the online environment where the management of identity is more ambiguous. One of the benefits of the online world has been described as the ability to participate in 'identity play', and to explore other personas and one's own sense of self (Donath, 1998; Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Turkle, 1997). This can be a negative experience, but the idea that one can be anonymous online was embedded in the culture of the social web until the explosion in usage generated by Facebook with its emphasis on 'real' names.

Anonymity is problematic for democratic participation with its connection to the unique citizen and within hyperlocal communities (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). As a member of a small and geographically defined network it is difficult to remain anonymous. In addition, differences in the description of identity between the online and offline spaces also create a tension. The question of democratic identity online with respect to formal process, has been examined in the context of

petitions (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008) and eVoting (Macintosh, Coleman, & Schneeberger, 2007). However, it is more difficult to examine in relation to the informal activity of hyperlocal websites where there is no obvious reason to enforce identification and where contact is more casual. Identity is important for democratic debate only in as much as it allows its representativeness to be measured, and might provide a robust way to understand the demographics and frequency of contributions without it being necessary to connect these together into the form of a single identity (the reverse process is used to anonymise large data sets – e.g. for medical research). However, it is difficult to disassociate identity from measures of representativeness.

Identity matters for the nature of online communities and the strength of ties within these communities. The degree of ‘public-ness’ in our relationships affects how they are conducted and how we judge people’s behaviours (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The implication is that this ‘public-ness’ changes relationships because opinions become accessible, and new connections have the ability to audit a person’s identity before a meeting with her or him. For a politician, it means their timeline – the public record of their interactions online - might hold a complete picture of their evolving opinions, creating an uneasy tension between the auditability of the digital context, and the tendency of the media (and other politicians) to attack opinion changes as being a sign of political weakness.

Our attitudes to privacy form a major part of our identity – what we choose to reveal to others and what we choose to reveal selectively has an impact on how we are perceived, which Goffman (Goffman, 1966) describes as ‘performance’. This

provides another point of tension between the online and offline environments and, by implication, the structures we use within them since the emergent online culture has different norms with respect to privacy compared to the offline world. We write ourselves into beings online when we create profiles and visible lists of our connections to describe ourselves to the outside world (Boyd, 2007a, 2007b). Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, has stated publicly that he believes privacy is no longer considered a social norm and he developed Facebook on that principle. Democracy done ‘the Facebook way’ would mean that one’s views, networks and affiliations would become public knowledge – as they do now for those not vigilant about privacy settings. The data are there for people to see and use and, as Morozov (Morozov, 2011) points out, this is true for both oppressive regimes and western liberals. Our views on privacy are evolving alongside the technology. Boyd discusses this in terms of a shift in *where* we are private as much as *what* we are private about (Boyd, 2008, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

2.4.2 Context collapse

Another relevant aspect of the wider discussion of online identity is the concept of ‘context collapse’. Goffman (Goffman, 1966) authoritatively describes how our identity is a continual performance to an audience of our own definition. Social networking sites allow us to continue this performance with carefully designed profiles, in order to present a conscious act of self or multiple selves if we choose to represent ourselves in different ways in different places. Given the ‘networked’ nature of these spaces individuals can speak simultaneously to multiple audiences in the same space and the “networked audience contains many different social

relationships to be navigated, so users acknowledge concurrent multiple audiences.” (Marwick & Boyd, 2010)

The implication of this is that it is impossible to separate audiences from contexts, resulting in different aspects of our lives, which previously we kept separate through divisions of time, space and audience, being conflated into a new self that combines the relaxed demeanour of the social setting with the more formal behaviour of the council chamber or a media interview. This context collapse is not just social it is also spatial. Massey suggests that “Space and place emerge through active material practices. Moreover, this movement of yours is not just spatial, it is also temporal.” (Massey, 2005, p. 118)

The implication of this collapse of context is that we have different senses of our self in terms of time and audience, in the same place, and persistently available. This creates some challenges. Firstly, the need for ‘authenticity’ is often cited with respect to politicians. Secondly there are additional problems in an environment where contradictions in position can be spotted, and where the development of a formed opinion may be as visible as the final opinion itself. Without accepting this collapse of context, it is difficult to appreciate the new interconnectedness of civic and political behaviours or the pressures that this puts on previous political behaviours.

As yet, we do not know what the implications will be of a generation of children growing up with the expectation of information constantly at their fingertips, although organisations such as the Pew Research Center and the Oxford Internet

Institute are trying to make some predictions. We also do not know what the implications would be of a significant shift in the boundaries to privacy. The body of work on this subject speculates about attitudinal shifts creating new social norms (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath, 2007), but voices concern over the need to reconnect with more 'human' connections (Turkle, 2011). The changes we are witnessing will be reflected in the future democratic landscape and, as such, should be part of the debate about what that democratic landscape should look like in the future.

In the context of the nature of political participation, it is significant that there is a generation of people who will be eligible to vote in the next general election in the UK, who have skills and outlooks that have been shaped by these technologies and are now part of what they consider to be 'normal'. The last two general elections in the UK were described as 'Internet elections' ("Audit of Political Engagement 9 (part one): The 2012 Report," 2012; Chadwick, 2010; Gibson et al., 2010) in the media, but the pace of technology adoption has since increased with the growth of mobile devices and mobile access, and the 2015 election will be fought with nearly all voters online, and many active on the social web via their phones. This is a rapidly changing landscape in which political outcomes may be shaped and influenced by participation online in the same way that online activity is acknowledged to be shaping the nature of political participation. The question of identity is discussed further in Chapter 3 where I address its role in the creation of digital civic space.

Returning to the theme of democratic participation, context collapse presents a significant challenge to the way in which our democratic process currently 'does business'. The negativity in the media caused by a politician's seeming to 'U-turn' and have a change of mind, is not compatible with the way that individuals' views evolve and change over time, and the ability to capture this evolution transparently. Beyond this, content collapse affects how we behave online by removing discretion and creating potentially uncomfortable connections between our public and private selves. The effect of context collapse and the parallel reduction in the ease with which discretion can be used, may have the potential to create a more honest and authentic political discourse or may result in greater fragmentation of opinion.

2.5 Pressure on the democratic process

The previous sections discuss how the qualities of networked and social technologies and the 'network of networks' which they support, create tensions and differences between online and offline groups and behaviours. I have referred to these groups and networks might affect local as opposed to global environments, and how digital networked technologies and the way in which citizens use them can be argued to be putting pressure on the democratic process by changing the ways in which the public is self-organising in order to influence decision-making.

Castells (Castells, 2000, p. 24) argues forcefully that "political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of instrumental flows,

and cultural codes, embedded in networks". I have referred to how any emergence of the Network Society could affect political institutions locally as well as nationally (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009; Webster, 1995; Wellman, 2001). This would suggest that these tools are affecting the way in which the political establishment is responding to the public (Chadwick, 2010; Coleman & Shane, 2011; Coleman, 2005a, 2005b; Stoker, 2006a, 2009). New media can be described as being similarly disruptive to political discourse, for example, the impact of television in terms of exerting pressure from the represented on both the individual representatives and the process of representation (Spiller & Coleman, 2003). The mediated relationship afforded by television between the representative is overtaken by the representation provided by new media which is less mediated and more direct (Coleman, 2005b) and has the potential to enable a more direct relationship, which might allow the citizen to bypass the processes of consultation currently in place (Williamson, 2009). Mediation is central to political (and other) communications (Livingstone, 2009), and in removing a layer of mediation the social web can be said to be creating pressure for change on the process of government.

Change to the process of government is one potential outcome of these pressures, and one that will rely either on government actors deciding to react to these pressures or an overwhelming increase in the pressure being exerted directly by external actors desirous of change. The succeeding sections argue for a constructive reaction to this pressure from government, in order to acknowledged issues related to democratic participation.

2.6 Democratic model

Machiavelli, the founder of political science, defined politics as “the struggle to win, utilize and contain power” (Held, 2006, p. 14) and this struggle is manifest in the constraints on the democratic process. Politics, democracy and civil society can be seen as a system of interrelated functions and behaviors.

Held (Held, 2006) defines 13 different models of democracy, of which the UK's current liberal representative democracy is a variant. These models range from the classical form of Athenian democracy to Held's own proposal of democratic autonomy which has the autonomous rights of the individual citizen at its core. Each of these models describes the relationship between rulers and ruled, and the degree of individual participation in decision making made possible by that model.

Democracy, in its earliest classical form, drew citizenship and participation tightly together. However, classical democracy was designed with a small city-state in mind and, as Held (Held, 2006, p. 272) says “The classical Athenian model, which developed in a tightly knit community, cannot be adapted to ‘stretch’ across space and time” and has evolved as society has changed, though arguably at a slower pace. Later models of democracy attempted to address this through various forms of participation by citizens and mandating of decision makers.

The nature of Athenian democracy was simplified by the fact that only citizens participated. The questions raised by universal emancipation did not arise since all citizens had sufficient capacity to participate. It can be argued that the question of how to overcome inequalities of circumstances is as much at the heart of the

divisions between left and right wing thinking as debates over interventionist vs small state models of government. These are political questions, and any system of democracy operates against a context of political behaviours.

Any form of participatory democracy (including deliberative) relies on the ability of citizens to participate fully in the process and have access to the decision-making arena. Young's (Held, 2006, p. 244) model of representation, for example, includes some fairly simple steps needed to ensure that democracy is open to effective representation from diverse social groups. She suggests the availability of public funds, an obligation to demonstrate that each group has actively listened and adjusted to other positions, and the granting of veto rights to groups directly affected by policy (e.g. for women with respect to legislation affecting reproductive rights). Her most challenging suggestion is to ensure that public dialogue includes forms of reasoning beyond the argumentative mode. She argues for the need for public debate to be formed of a range of participation methods that balance issues of access and efficacy for minority groups (Held, 2006, p. 244) .

The fieldwork described later in this thesis was based on the current model of liberal representative democracy. However, this constraint is lifted in the discussion in the discussion of the results in Chapter 7, where more participatory and deliberative models are considered as being more appropriate to support democratic participation in a Network Society.

2.7 Democratic deficit

Evidence of the current pressure on participation might be seen in the generally acknowledged democratic deficit in the UK. The term democratic deficit was coined by Marquand (Marquand, 1978) with respect to the European Parliament and the gap between its decision making powers and voter turnout. It is now used more generally to refer to a lack of public participation in democratic decision-making and a concern over the reduction in legitimacy of the mandate of elected representatives to govern, when voter turnout and other forms of citizen participation are low. It is a term that is used widely within local government in the UK, and expresses concern about levels of participation in local democracy.

There several ways to measure democratic participation, for example:

- Levels of voter turnout;
- Membership of political parties;
- Willingness to stand for election or formal office.

Levels of voter turnout have been on a general downward trend since the First World War, with local elections generally showing lower levels of participation than national. A 2012 article in the Guardian data blog ("UK election historic turnouts since 1918 | News | theguardian.com," n.d.) provides an overview of election data since 1918 which clearly illustrates this trend:

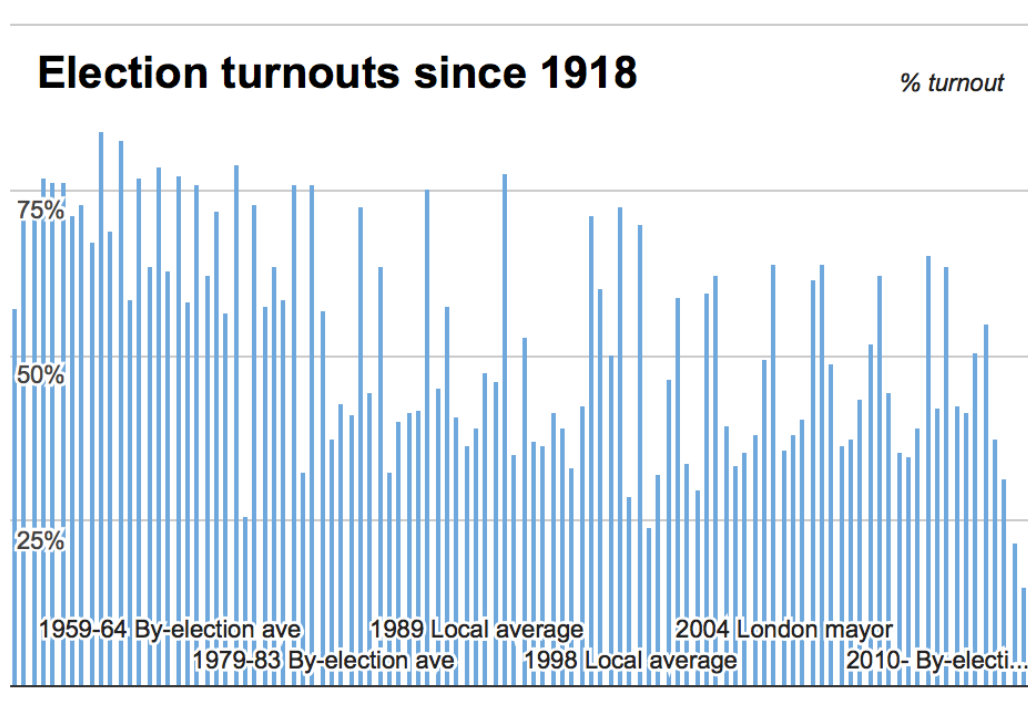


Figure 2.1: Election turnout since 1918

Local government in the UK has experienced even steeper falls in voter turnout than seen at the national level as evidenced by the monitoring results of the Electoral Commission.¹⁰ Membership of political parties, an indicator of citizens' commitment to and interest in the political process, has similarly declined as can be seen from recent statistics provided by the House of Commons library service ((Mcguinness, 2012):

¹⁰ <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/results/local> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

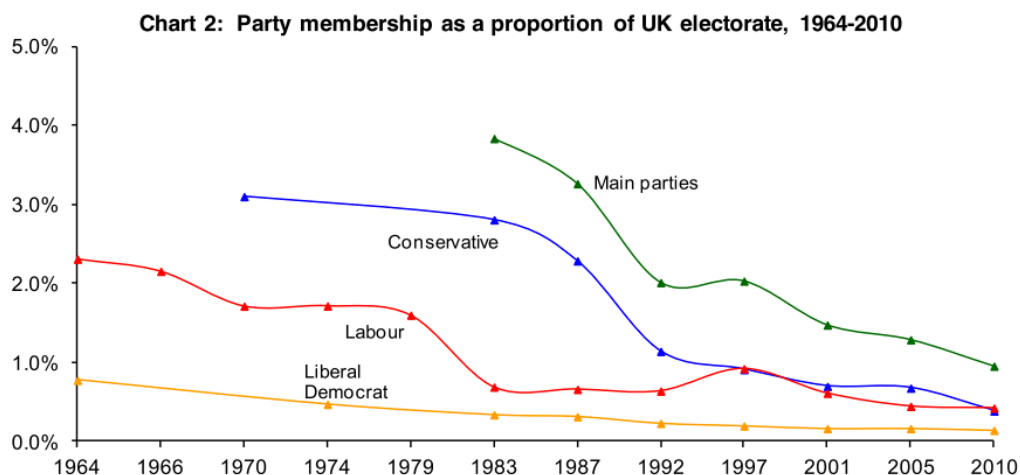


Figure 2.2: Party membership as a proportion of UK Electorate, 1964-2010

Finally, there is evidence of reductions in other measures of democratic participation such as number of people willing to stand for office at the local level (“Audit of Political Engagement 5: The 2008 Report,” 2008, “Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report,” 2011, “Audit of Political Engagement 9 (part one): The 2012 Report,” 2012).

What these three measures show is reduced participation in the process of choosing our representatives and a resulting democratic deficit due to a weakened mandate for our representatives. However, these are indications of participation in the electoral process and, while this is clearly a critical aspect of a representative democracy, it is not the only way that citizens participate in a democratic society. For example, Norris (Norris, 2011) proposes a more positive interpretation of the current state of participation in describing democratic deficit as a gap between the degree to which we value democracy and our level of satisfaction with how it works. According to this definition it is possible for our belief in and commitment to democracy to grow, and to result in an *increased* deficit. Norris makes the case

for a positive aspect on democratic deficit in its reflecting a citizen body that is informed and able to question its leaders, which would be a strong democratic outcome, or a healthy scepticism towards its leaders. This case depends on our ability to reliably measure citizen satisfaction and perhaps also reflects that, an examination of democratic deficits on a global scale provides Norris with little evidence within established liberal democracies of a substantial drop in confidence with respect to democracy being the best method of governing. This is tempered by the fact that within Norris's study the UK and Portugal were the two EU countries that have seen the greatest erosion in trust and show some longer-term impacts which go beyond the electoral cycle which periodically shows a temporary increase in participation against the longer-term decrease described above.

Alternatively, Stoker (Stoker, 2006b) acknowledges the importance of social connections and community in the democratic process, but rather than referring to democratic deficit he describes a climate of 'anti-politics' where people and communities are actively turning away from the political process rather than their communities. Stoker talks about the absence of an environment in which civic understanding could reasonably exist and grow into political engagement. Addressing this absence is one of the purposes of the digital civic space described in Chapter 4 of this thesis. This reframing of the democratic deficit to focus on a failure of the political process rather than a failure of society, is consistent with an analysis that describes communities as being active and engaged at the same time as being disinterested in engaging with or becoming politicians.

The degree to which a community can be said to be civically active has been examined by the Citizenship Survey (commissioned annually by the Department of Communities until 2010)¹¹ which records that 47% of the population engaged in one or more forms of civic participation locally in 2010. This engagement is dominated by survey responses (consultation) and petition signing (participation), rather than by more active forms of engagement such as volunteering. As will be discussed later, these forms of participation, when conducted online, are criticised for being 'clicktivism' rather than 'activism' (Karpf, 2010b). This contrasts with more involved forms of participation, for example, the in some cases full time commitment of becoming a local councillor. Where people do get involved, the 2011 Hansard Audit shows a citizen preference for non-political volunteering rather than becoming politically active within the community - and find only 14% of the population to be what they describe as 'willing localists'¹² ("Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report," 2011).

The reduction in state funding from local government which resulted from the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) makes this issue more acute, and the narrative of the Big Society (Jones, Rowson, & Broome, 2010) has caused local government to reconsider not only its forms of consultation, but also its forms of

¹¹

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/citizenshipsurveyq4200910> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

¹² The Hansard report defines willing localists as "not actively involved in a wide range of community and socio-political activities but seem[ing] the most willing to do so and are those most likely, realistically, to become so in the future." ("Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report," 2011, p. 12).

participation and activism in considering how to ensure services are delivered from a reduced resource base. Civic participation in the form of volunteering as measured in the survey discussed above, represents citizens exercising choice over how they spend their time; volunteers do not want to be governed by the state (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, & Warburton, 2010) which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for government to direct volunteering to fill resource gaps. It may be that citizens are choosing to fill the gaps in other ways distinct from formal service, or it may be that government is attempting to deliver services which are not needed or desired by citizens. There is a further possibility, which is that there may be an imperfect match between the location of the willing localists described above, and the needs of communities. Chapter 3 argues that, at present, we have imperfect knowledge of active citizens in localities.

To summarise, many communities can be said to be active, and the democratic deficit, if present, does not, on this evidence, indicate disinterest in community or civic activities, rather may be linked to disenchantment with the political process as Stoker suggests. However, the result is the same since weaker participation in the process of representation can be argued to indicate a democratic deficit that is of concern if decisions are to be representative of the citizens.

2.8 Civic or political?

The consequences of a democratic deficit include the perception that political communication is in a state of crisis and, as Blumler argues, there is a deterioration

in the capacity of political communication to service either citizens or representatives:

More appropriate could be definition of a crisis as “a diffuse awareness that practices may have to change and change sharply if their core purposes are to be sustained” (Dunn, 1994). Viewed in that light, the key questions are, Has there been a clear deterioration in the capacity of political communication arrangements to:

- serve citizens more than politicians and journalists?
- offer meaningful choices between governing teams and agendas?
- promote a broad sense of participation in government?
- satisfy our symbolic commitment to the notion of democracy?

By these yardsticks, we are surely in crisis! (Blumler, 1997, p. 3)

To a great extent this perceived crisis in political communication has been subsumed within a debate about the nature of the relationship between the media and the citizen. Flinders (Flinders, 2012) suggests that political science has itself become part of the problem with respect to the political cynicism that underlies the reduction in participation and our concern over democratic participation.

The central question in this section is whether the academic study of political communication is too focused on the relationship between the media and politicians, and insufficiently focused on the citizen as a potential solution to what is perceived as a crisis of political communication. In the fieldwork for this thesis one of the most common comments made by local online activists was that their contribution and activity was civic, not political. This section explores the literature around this issue and suggests how a different view of the citizen and the nature of online participation could go some way to addressing the perceived political communication crisis.

The ability of the social web to provide direct access to non-traditional actors also challenges the increasing professionalization of the political communications process, which has turned electioneering into something more akin to product marketing (Blumler, 1997). Hindman (Hindman, 2009, p. 724) points out that one element of this pressure is overstated in that the fact that an individual has put up a political blog does not automatically confer an audience and influence - he describes it as similar to “hosting a talk show on public access television at 3:30 in the morning”. In so saying, he is proposing a narrow definition of political, and limiting his definition of audience to those accessing via traditional media. This would seem to ignore that the potential for political change can often start with a limited range of local or specialist issues that could be considered civic rather than political, and garner support and participation over time. These actions may have the potential to have a far greater impact on the local political landscape than those considered by the mainstream media. The absence of an audience for much political content online again describes the conditions of democratic deficit – which is useful, but does not look beyond political analysis to bring social analysis to bear since it assumes the necessity for a large audience to convey validity and have an impact. Hindman is also concerned about the elitism of the blogosphere:

“These findings raise the question of what, exactly, the phrase elite media means. These top bloggers have educational backgrounds that exceed those of professional columnists. The readership of the top blogs rivals the nation’s top op-ed pages. Moreover, the blogosphere has succeeded in re-creating some of the traditional punditocracy’s most worrisome elitist characteristics. One of these is a dearth of gender and ethnic diversity.”(Hindman, 2009, p. 1533)

Hindman seems to divide the blogosphere world into two camps – one that can be ignored without consequence and one that is in direct competition with existing media, albeit being no more inclusive or representative. This seems to ignore the potential for constructive and relevant contributions that are limited in scope or reach. In Chapter 3 this kind of ‘middle ground’ of civic contributions that are not in competition with the mainstream media is discussed in more detail. In addition to ignoring a potential group of active citizens, limiting digital political participation to the contribution of ‘elite bloggers’ who in effect have joined the ranks of the more formally named journalists, could be seen as an attempt to reframe the impact of the Internet in this realm as simply a reworking of and challenge to traditional media. To do so does not address the fact that journalists are not a definitive source of truth with respect to the reasoning and motivations of politicians (Farrell & Drezner, 2007; Patterson, 2010), and ignores the contribution of bloggers to more civic conversation. This analysis also risks failing to take account of the way in which information and power operate within the social web and the possibility through network effects for seemingly obscure content or authors to achieve prominence (Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2002), rather than assuming as Hindman does, that audience size and influence are the same. It is true that this framing of elite blogs as part of the mainstream media sees a separation and disinterest between the citizen and political discourse, and a dependence on a negative description of the citizen as an actor in this relationship.

The traditional media in many ways have acted as gatekeepers to politicians, and have mediated the citizen-representative relationship, providing interpretation and insight on the one hand, and a description of ‘public opinion’ on the other. This

has been a two-way relationship with politicians often perceiving their own behaviour through the lens of media attention. The Internet disrupts this in two ways; firstly, in the ability of 'institutional outsiders', such as third sector organisations, to more easily open a topic up for debate, and secondly, in the ability of new organisations or movements to form rapidly and on sufficient scale to affect the media landscape (Shulman, 2009). Finally the Internet and networked technologies make it possible for any content creator addressing an audience outside of his or her immediate private circle to be able to publish and share that content, which is, as discussed in the next chapter, resulting in a proliferation of content that is civic as opposed to political in nature.

2.9 The public sphere

An essential element of the relationship between citizen and state is the state's ability to listen effectively to the public - something it is argued that government currently does badly (Coleman, 2005b). Debate over current affairs and community issues happens both online and offline and is an intrinsic element of any legitimate democracy. Habermas's 'public sphere' describes this public conversation as a space which encapsulates political, social and cultural debate. Discussion on the role of the Internet with respect to the public sphere is well established (Dahlgren, 2005).

Habermas suggests that the public sphere is essential to the functioning of society in providing the guidance and identity needed for society to function. He portrays

the public sphere as constituting an informal instrument of debate that consciously supports the political process;

Wherever the public established itself institutionally as a stable group of discussant, it did not equate itself with *the* public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator – the new form of bourgeois representation. (Habermas, 1962, p. 37)

In normative terms, the health of the public sphere depends on a belief in its importance, and this is one of the conditions for its existence - it requires conscious participation.

The public sphere can also be considered a framework for describing interactions that transcend 'socialising', but that are not yet formally political since both the public and private spheres can be said to sit within the 'lifeworld' rather than the state system (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003, p. 184). This is a criterion that is challenged by context collapse (see section 2.5.2), which conflates all types of content and audience within the same web space. Hyperlocal content, which is of central interest to this thesis (see Ch. 3. section 3.7), is not necessarily an act of journalistic or political comment, and the intent of participations with respect to formal or informal democratic debate is difficult to ascertain except where they form part of specific campaigns or involve direct connection to politicians. Much of the content found in the hyperlocal space can be described as relevant to civic society, but not necessarily as an intended act of political debate, which challenges the simple articulation of the Internet as a public sphere. In examining the social web as a potential location for the public sphere, the lack of conscious or active participation within networked publics is another filter to be applied to the content that is found. It is also another reason for interest in the consciously active

hyperlocal websites discussed in Chapter three, for examining local political participation.

Despite being central to the discussion and analysis of political communication, Habermas's concept of a single public sphere has been challenged on a more general basis. Gitlin (Gitlin, 1998) suggests that the public sphere has been fragmented as mainstream media have become more fragmented, and terms the collection of resulting fragments 'sphericules'. Fraser (Fraser, 2011) points to the bourgeois and elitist bias in the idea of a single space, and outlines the benefits for minority groups in having a multiplicity of publics. Bruns (Bruns, 2008) goes further and suggests that we might be 'beyond the public sphere' with political communication becoming the output of networked communities of citizens.

Habermas and others have voiced their concerns about the general health of the public sphere with direct reference to current mass media trends towards a simplification of ideas and a drive towards the use of mass communication techniques for advertising, rather than debate among those with a belief in the importance of a vibrant public sphere, as an essential element of a functioning democracy.

Despite these criticisms, many authors argue that the pervasive nature of information in the Network Society should mean that the public sphere is able to thrive online and according to some authors, such as Dahlgren (Dahlgren 2011), in many ways it is. The shifting boundaries between public and private which the social web brings both in terms of identity and in terms of content (Boyd 2007),

mean that the term 'public' needs to be considered in a different context to Habermas's original. The impact of a life led mainly in public brings with it some necessary blurring between social and political participation and, as a result, a lack of conscious participation, evidenced in the numerous examples of people's private remarks within public spaces online, leading to media retribution. Habermas's public sphere has a degree of formality and rationality that results from the idea of participants choosing to interact with it. It could be argued that contemporary understanding of the public sphere involves less mediation and less formality than the public sphere originally proposed by Habermas. While this allows participants to take advantage of the publicness of the social web the effect of collapsing context, weakens the idea that individuals are actively participating in a dialogue that they believe will inform decision making.

2.9.1 The public sphere and the democratic deficit

In relation to the process of democratic decision-making, public sphere describes the opportunity to connect elected representatives to contemporary debate on relevant issues. The increasingly fractured nature of the Internet, and the growth of self-publishing and social networking tools are making it easy for citizens to express their views, but do not necessarily make it easy or necessary to connect the elements of debate that could constitute a public sphere.

The Habermasian public sphere reflects the idea of a public conversation that supports the democratic process. Conversation requires reciprocity - both listening and talking; government needs to consider how it relates to these shifting

norms in a different way than to date: “In the interactive era, government has not proved to be a particularly good conversationalist” (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). This is a relatively new concern. Previously government has not been required to be a good conversationalist since the media fulfilled the role of discussant in political debate. There is a recurring concern that our political communication process does not connect effectively with the citizen. Gurevitch (Gurevitch et al., 2009) and Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009) suggest that a national news provider may be the best way of ensuring editorial balance, but this proposal does not fully embrace the shift in media behaviours brought by self-publication, nor does it address the collapse of regional media in the UK as many smaller papers fail to reinvent their business models to address the disruption caused by the Internet.

It is generally held that politicians need to understand the people that they represent in order to be effective, and that an effective representative democracy requires not only participation at the ballot box, but also with respect to the current cultural and political debates required to inform public opinion. It is commonly held that the media are no longer adequately fulfilling this role and Internet technologies are taking on an increasing role in forming popular opinion.

Self-publication and an changed role for media reflect a change in the way that citizens could participate in political debate, and describe a modern public sphere as one with constant unmediated contributions from citizens who have expectations that these contributions will be listened to in some way by decision makers, while those same decision makers have not developed the mechanisms for either listening to or interacting with this citizen generated content.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed some the literature relevant to the questions outlined in the first chapter. The social changes described in the earlier sections provide the context for the changes in political communication and democratic participation described in later sections of the chapter. It highlighted some of the gaps created by the as yet incomplete take up of digital networked technologies -specifically the gap between a global and local context. In taking this forward, three key concepts are central to developing the design for a digital civic space advanced in Chapter 4. The first of these is the importance of a proper understanding of the design affordances of digital spaces, the second is the centrality of the effects of network structures and the nature of participation within these networks, and the third is the tension between civic and political participation that arises when we consider the nature of the digital and networked public sphere. This thesis is based on action research into how to address the issue of democratic deficit. The central concepts in this chapter are taken forward into the design work described in Chapter 4 and the research methods presented in Chapter 5. They are presented as potential solutions to the problem of democratic deficit either by remediation and reengagement of the public with the democratic process, or by building sustainable and effective alternatives for a formally constituted democratic process.

Chapter 3 discusses participation in a number of different forms. Firstly, with respect to work on eParticipation, which was intended as a way for government to

use technology to address the democratic deficit. Secondly, this is contrasted with the literature discussing digital activism involving citizens campaigning and organising online without the involvement of government process or representation. Thirdly, the different aspects of participation are discussed in the context of the literature on community engagement.

Chapter 3: Civil society online

This chapter moves from more general discussion of the cultural and political issues that frame this thesis, to discuss more specific theories and literature relating to online and offline community and participation. Chapter 2 referred to the intent in this chapter as being to critique government led efforts to activate or mobilise a specific vision of online public engagement (eParticipation), and contrast this with citizen led efforts for the same purpose (Digital Activism). This chapter discusses the literature on online and offline community engagement and behaviour as a contributing element of what is termed ‘informal civic participation’ and is described in detail in Chapter 4 as an element of the proposed design criteria for the creation of digital civic space.

3.1 EParticipation: a solution?

Technology is regarded as a potential solution to the problem of democratic deficit and as a way to provide more transactional services related to local government, for example, tax calculation and collection, to the online public. This section examines whether existing approaches to the use of technology to engage citizens in democratic participation are meeting the needs of a more social and networked society. This is not to present digital platforms as a panacea to the challenges of democratic engagement. Online participation will not necessarily increase the individual likelihood of participating democratically, but greater use of digital technologies will lower barriers to participation (Williamson, 2009) in a way that at least starts to address one of the issues related to democratic deficit.

Since the mid 2000s, a number of government funded initiatives in the UK and other countries have been launched to examine and develop eGovernment solutions for government operations. More recently, we have seen projects in the form of the 'crowd sourcing' of the UK Freedom Bill¹³ and an open call for cost saving measures from the UK Treasury.¹⁴ Works on E-participation broadly look at the use of technology to connect citizens with decision-making processes and to explore new forms of deliberative tools that would deepen citizen involvement in democratic processes, or to examine how, for example, data mining might add value to paper based consultation processes (Bicquelet & Weale, 2011). E-participation is concerned with exploring ways that technology can be used to help and extend citizen participation in all forms of decision-making. E-participation is distinct from 'eGovernment' which is concerned with the role of technology in all government transactions and processes rather than just only those concerned with democracy and decision-making.

On coming to Office in 1997, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair set a target of 2005 to get all government services online. The local government eGovernment National projects were created to support this target and in 2004 the eDemocracy National Project was created. This provided a model for local government in the UK to explore a number of different tools for online engagement. Overall evaluation of the project was positive and provided a framework and more importantly confidence in local government in relation to making greater use of new technology (Macintosh et al., 2004). The project identified, but did not explore

¹³ <http://tna.europarchive.org/20100907111509/yourfreedom.hmg.gov.uk/> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

¹⁴ http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_challenge_ideas_1.htm (Retrieved 16.02.13).

some of the cultural barriers to councils adopting these new methods, which are addressed in Chapter 6, and highlighted that citizens did not have high expectations of their input influencing the final decision.

More widely, a large number of projects have been funded by the European Commission focused on an area called 'eParticipation' through the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme. This funding was a direct response to the EU's concern over the issue of democratic deficit. One of the requirements of the funding is that projects are evaluated with the result that there is a large literature describing these projects including a project called Demo-net,¹⁵ aimed at collecting and aggregating 'best practice' in these projects. The project report provides an excellent overview of this area (Macintosh et al., 2007).

What is striking in the systematic analysis of these initiatives carried out as part of the Demo-net project is the degree to which the projects have a technological focus on problem solving, the fact that they look to engage the public with existing decision-making processes seen from the perspective of government rather than the citizen. In other words, these projects are aimed at taking the current systems and putting them online rather than examining how social and behavioural change might require these processes to change. Thus, it could be argued that they do not respond to the behaviour changes outlined in the previous chapter. MacIntosh's (Macintosh, 2004) work proposes the following model of decision-making:

¹⁵ <http://www.demo-net.org/> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

Agenda setting	Establishing the need for a policy or a change in policy and defining what the problem to be addressed is
Analysis:	Defining the challenges and opportunities associated with an agenda item more clearly in order to produce a draft policy document. This can include: gathering evidence and knowledge from a range of sources including citizens and civil society organizations; understanding the context, including the political context for the agenda item; developing a range of options
Creating the policy	Ensuring a good workable policy document. This involves a variety of mechanisms which can include: formal consultation, risk analysis, undertaking pilot studies, and designing the implementation plan
Implementing the policy:	This can involve the development of legislation, regulation, guidance, and a delivery plan
Monitoring the policy	This can involve evaluation and review of the policy in action, research evidence and views of users. Here there is the possibility to loop back to stage one

Table 1.1: MacIntosh model of Decision-Making (Macintosh, 2004)

MacIntosh's model does not include the formative act of taking a decision; instead, it moves from creation of policy to its implementation and does not address the decision-making point. This is the basis of wider criticism of much of the eParticipation literature that it supports the questionable belief that consultation and engagement happen in parallel with the political process, and have meaning in and of each other rather than being characterised as support for political decision-making (Chadwick, 2011; Macintosh, 2006a; Pratchett & Wingfield, 2005; Pratchett, 2006).

The findings from the UK national projects provide little evidence that the tools that replicate the current decision-making process online are having a positive impact with respect to increased participation. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that these initiatives do not address the underlying issue of democratic deficit or will not help government to adapt to the changing circumstances of the Network Society. Lowndes and colleagues (Lowndes et al., 2006a) suggest the CLEAR (Can do, Like to, Enabled to, Asks to, Respond to) Framework which focuses on the idea that the process should be responsive to the participation of the citizens and moves beyond the instrumentalist approach of much of the eParticipation literature. However, it still does not connect to the theory of community participation practitioners and the adoption of more co-productive approaches which are discussed in section 3.3.

The final criticism of eParticipation is its evident failure to engage the public. There are few case studies showing widespread adoption and little evidence of its policy impacts. Ultimately, this approach has not achieved the kind of traction seen in connection with the social web and, as a result, the political establishment is arguing for the importance of quality over quantity with respect to participation because of the perceived low transactional cost of online participation. This devalues what might be a valid and felt act of participation by citizens and perhaps adds to the feelings of disenfranchisement among those not already part of the deliberative process:

Faced with low participation rates, many e-democracy programs have fallen back on the argument that numbers do not matter and that it is the quality of political deliberation that counts. The best-known formal deliberative schemes have never grown beyond communities of a few hundred. When you are faced with this sort of problem best to use an ellipse ... to omit part of the original text ... critics have questioned the reliance by interest organizations on form emails and Web templates that enable many thousands of citizens to send comments to policy makers (Shulman 2006). But should we devalue large numbers of individual citizen actions, even if those actions carry very little cost? Web 2.0 environments are significant because they enshrine participation by thousands or even hundreds of thousands in scalable ways. The most powerful Web 2.0 applications--particularly at online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter--derive their value from the predictable network effects associated with large numbers of participants. Because they are not tied to a heavily deliberative model, political networks in Facebook and Twitter are able to grow comparatively quickly, and as more people participate, there is more value in the network. (Chadwick, 2012, p. 1229)

Value in a network can be measured in many different ways, for example, by looking at social capital (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998) or examining reach through social network a (Marcus, Neumark, & Broome, 2011). In this context the value of the network is in terms of its ability to influence mainstream discussion, usually by attracting the attention of the media and, as a result, becoming part of the agenda setting process (Scheufele, 2009).

The assumption underlying eParticipation that the public might want to interact with government online might still be sound. However, the disappointing levels of take-up of eParticipation initiatives means that this assumption needs to be questioned and change in behaviours, indicated by the take-up of more networked and social technologies by the public, should be considered. Examination of the literature on citizen initiated civic and political activity in succeeding sections provides an alternative view of how the public might interact with government online.

3.2 Digital activism

A frequent aphorism among practitioners working with technology and democracy in local government is that current practice is focused on ‘trying to take 19th century processes and make them work in a 21st century context’. The response to this challenge made in this thesis is that perhaps the question should be reframed and how people are participating outside of the formal and understood processes should be examined. The previous sections examined the literature on community engagement and political communication within the context of social change towards a more networked society. This section examines and describes some of the behaviours that can be seen among users of the social web and represent the upward pressure for change outlined previously. This section specifically examines digital activism and explores how it might affect local decision-making.

Concurrently with government wrestling with the problem of how to adapt to the Network Society, the public are shown to be ‘getting on with it’ and exploring ways in which the new tools can be used to express opinions and viewpoints and gather energy behind campaigns which are either entirely online or at least organised online. Digital activism covers a range of activities, usually focused around single or at least tightly focused sets of issues. It has developed in the last few years as the numbers of people online have grown, and now, in many cases, is one of the

first public responses to an issue. The UKUncut movement¹⁶ formed initially via a hash tag on Twitter, and the 'hackergate' scandal which incited huge public outcry by informing people that *News International* had hacked into people's voicemails, resulting in the establishment of a petitioning site which collected thousands of signatures within hours of the news breaking. While these movements have been examined extensively (Brasted, 2012; Karpf, 2010b; Shulman, 2009), the object of analysis is often mainstream media or political parties rather than social movements or civic participation. In discussing different forms of digital activism this section considers three main areas:

- large scale campaigning and specialist campaigning organisations;
- more general digital activism, perhaps involving traditional groups such as Amnesty;
- Targeted lobbying on specific issues.

The term digital in this context includes email, web sites and social media via computers, mobile phones or tablet devices and the activities in all use aspects of these. The common factor in all of these cases is that they take advantage of low cost of entry to use these tools and are responding to the opportunity to reach a wider network online.

A relatively new phenomenon is the growing number of campaigning organisations that mobilise their members on a range of often global issues, which

¹⁶ The UKUncut movement formed to protest against the 2010 coalition programme of government funding cuts: <http://www.ukuncut.org.uk> (retrieved 14.04.14).

include *Avaaz* in the US and *GetUp!* in Australia, and *38 degrees* in the UK. Membership numbers are in the hundreds of thousands, and members can have input to the topics campaigned about. This sense of community is an important motivator for action. The Avaaz site describes its aims thus:

Previous international citizens' groups and social movements have had to build a constituency for each separate issue, year by year and country by country, in order to reach a scale that could make a difference.

Today, thanks to new technology and a rising ethic of global interdependence, that constraint no longer applies. Where other global civil society groups are composed of issue-specific networks of national chapters, each with its own staff, budget, and decision-making structure, Avaaz has a single, global team with a mandate to work on any issue of public concern--allowing campaigns of extraordinary nimbleness, flexibility, focus, and scale.

Avaaz's online community can act like a megaphone to call attention to new issues; a lightning rod to channel broad public concern into a specific, targeted campaign; a fire truck to rush an effective response to a sudden, urgent emergency; and a stem cell that grows into whatever form of advocacy or work is best suited to meet an urgent need. (Avaaz 'About us' Page¹⁷)

This is a statement of aims and, on many measures, movements such as Avaaz can be shown to be able to create a large audience for the issues they highlight. What is less certain is whether they are successful in changing the issue and affect policy; their efficacy in this respect is not proven.

In many ways this is the campaigning equivalent of the political party and as these sites clearly state, this form of organisation would be impossible without the power of social networked technologies. MoveOn and 38 Degrees work in similar ways – they are member-led organisations that focus on specific campaigns rather

¹⁷ <http://www.avaaz.org/en/about.php> (Retrieved 26.01.13).

than trying to build consensus around shared values. They are inherently oppositional which means that they are unlikely to engage in the kind of consensus building required for real political change (Brasted, 2012). Their kind of direct action would be extremely difficult without new technologies, and they rely for their impact on the speed and reach of social media. It is currently not clear how effective these organisations are in terms of outcomes, and they are frequently criticised for encouraging “slacktivism” - the idea that because the action is simple to carry out, for example, signing an online petition, the action should be valued less by policy makers (Christensen, 2011; Karpf, 2010b). There is clearly something happening that participants are judging as significant since these sites are experiencing large and growing membership and so are clearly answering some kind of need.

Are these sites political? While there seems to be some sort of consensus around values, these sites do not deliver a coherent manifesto since they operate on an issue-by-issue basis. This suggests that they are not political in the conventional sense, despite seeking to influence political decisions albeit from outside of the political system. There is a stronger argument saying that these sites are a reflection of civil society and provide participants with the opportunity to act as citizens without having to interact with the political system. This echoes many of the comments from research participants (see Ch. 6, section 6.3.5) who want to be ‘civic’ but not political. It could be argued that these sites operate in the middle ground (see Ch. 2 section 2.7), which contains public debate outside of the sphere of the mainstream media, and allows them to be described as civic rather than political.

Online campaigning in the most rudimentary form has become standard practice for charities and other lobbying organisations. Greenpeace, for example, has a whole section devoted to “Campaign Online” where one can donate a tweet a day to Greenpeace. Online activism is cheaper and because it does not rely on the campaigners’ abilities to attract media attention (though this would undoubtedly help), it has the potential to achieve far greater reach than offline participation. This may be an extension of the support and information communities (discussed in more detail in section 3.4) but may also be a parallel community, dedicated to the campaigning aspect of a charity rather than its outputs or services. It has been argued that these new forms of activism are creating competition for the current political process (Blumler & Kavanagh, 2010); the main question is whether or not this activism is effective to which I will return.

Digital activism is still new which makes it difficult to comment on the effect it might have on the longer-term decision-making cycle or to address whether it is any more significant than an effective media campaign. Gladwell’s (Gladwell, 2010) assertion that “The revolution will not be tweeted” would indicate not. He proposes the argument that effective activism means taking risks, and that the weak ties of the social web are not enough for this. He does not disagree with Granovetter’s (Granovetter, 1973) examination of the strength of weak ties in terms of their importance for spreading information through networks, but he believes that these weak ties are not sufficiently influential to bring about high risk, collective action.

Gladwell's citing of the Iranian uprising in his article refers to the 2009 election protest which, at least in the eyes of western media, was hugely helped by mobilization and communication via Twitter, to the extent that the US government asked Twitter's management to postpone system upgrades to avoid downtime during the critical period. The more sceptical commentators point out that since the western media were only looking at English language tweets and since Twitter take up in Iran is low, this is a distorted picture. This overlooks the fact that, whatever the effect on the national situation, global opinion was formed largely using social media since the audience could be considered to be western media – and this is an effect in its own right. Gladwell seems to adopt a binary position – campaigns are either online or offline - whereas the evidence shows that this is not how people use these tools (Karpf, 2010b; McCafferty, 2011; Sivitanides & Marcos, 2011). There is a contrasting argument which suggests that the agility and speed provided by these new networks, and their related offline groups and activities, are a serious threat to the dominance of political parties in decision-making (Blumler & Coleman, 2010; Shirky, 2010, 2011).

Extensive claims have been made for digital activism citing evidence of cause and effect of campaigns and outcomes – for example, the online petitions to Downing Street which derailed the Road Pricing trials in 2007. It is too simplistic to conclude that there is a direct relationship between cause and effect without in depth examination of what happened within government. In this and other instances it is difficult to confirm a causal link. There are always other factors at work and it is evident that the ability to rally mass participation quickly and effectively through an email campaign, for example, brings new pressures to bear

on the decision-making process. An email campaign may become a nuisance and ultimately be ignored unless the comments and engagement within campaigns are improved – or until participants make more effective use of the information at their disposal, to substantiate their campaigns.

Accusations of ‘Slacktivism’ or ‘Clicktivism’ are frequently levelled at digital campaigns by more traditional campaigners. This comment from a 2010 *Guardian* newspaper essay outlines the objection:

Exchanging the substance of activism for reformist platitudes that do well in market tests, clicktivists damage every genuine political movement they touch. In expanding their tactics into formerly untrammelled political scenes and niche identities, they unfairly compete with legitimate local organisations who represent an authentic voice of their communities. They are the Wal-Mart of activism: leveraging economies of scale, they colonise emergent political identities and silence underfunded radical voices. (Micah White, *Guardian* August 2010¹⁸)

There is a question in the minds of many politicians about whether participation in an online campaign is a significant political or civic act. There is an argument that publicising these actions - putting a name online on a petition, for example - connects the individual’s beliefs to his or her online identity and, as a result, makes this act significant in terms of the individual’s identity.

Campaigning has a long and proud culture and set of values – in many ways it is tribal and these values are reflected in the identity of the individual. In evaluating digital campaigning, the degree to which objections are a cultural rejection of new

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism>
(Retrieved 26.01.13).

techniques should be considered and compared with the degree to which they can be considered objective criticism. Many of the objections to online campaigning are made not on the basis that these campaigns do not work, but on the basis of the low level of commitment required of participants. The issue hangs between the articulation of digital campaigning as being effective media manipulation, and the idea that it is a new way of enabling wider scale 'proper' participation. 'Proper' in this context is defined as reasoned public debate – a contribution to the public sphere. The fear with respect to online campaigns is that the ease of participation outweighs more substantive or deliberative engagement in the public sphere, and that this more ephemeral participation creates a set of hidden cost in terms of the richness of the public sphere (Karpf, 2010a, 2010b).

Karpf's research was conducted before the growth of campaigning communities, such as MoveOn, which embed the idea of debate into the process of deciding the campaign, and thus should perhaps be considered differently – the campaign being the outcome of the contribution to the public sphere rather than the contribution itself. Karpf concludes that it would be mistaken to consider these online campaigns in isolation and that they should be judged instead as a new tool in the campaigning arsenal. It is important to note also that these campaigns are not always comfortable for the relatively liberal political mainstream since extremist groups can also use these tools effectively. Sunstein's description of group polarization acknowledges this:

Group polarization is unquestionably occurring on the Internet. Indeed, it is clear that the Internet is serving, for many, as a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are deliberating with one another, without hearing contrary views. (Sunstein, 2001, p. 714)

Boulianne's (Boulianne, 2009) examination of 38 studies of Internet effects on political and civic actions finds no evidence that Internet activism has a negative effect though the group polarisation effect has been noted on Twitter as well as within the context described by (S. Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Digital activism clearly has an effect in terms of reach and speed, and its mass mobilization can be shown to be both dramatic and important (Shirky, 2011; Sivitanides & Marcos, 2011). It is more difficult to say what will be the longer-term effects of digital activism. Is the networked society building a population of people who are more informed and more willing to participate, or are we all being lulled into thinking that the simple clicking of a button means that we have discharged our civic responsibility? The slow speed of policy and decision-making means it is probably too soon to understand thoroughly the effect that these campaigns have had on our political landscape, and it will be difficult to do so when government is adjusting to accommodate new forms of engagement. Coleman (Coleman, 2004b) provides a compelling argument about why we should take these new digital movements seriously and find some way to connection them to our decision-making processes to take advantage of the ability to engage with people in their own spaces and on their own terms. He uses the analogy of public meetings in "drafty civic halls" and these "new loci of active citizenship" (Coleman, 2004a, p. 19).

Whether digital activism is a new and more direct form of media manipulation than was possible in a less networked, less digital world, or whether it reflects a new kind of campaigning movement, it is clearly of interest and concern to both policy makers and elected representatives. Where the tools of eParticipation described in the previous section represent a 'digitisation' of the relationship

between citizen and state, based on the current democratic model, the challenge of digital activism leading today's citizens might suggest that the public is demanding a different kind of democratic relationship. The next section examines the relationship between citizen and state as discussed by community engagement practitioners who are also concerned with how government might work more actively with communities and citizens.

3.3 Community engagement

An alternate starting position to the examination of public participation as instigated via digitisation of democratic processes (section 3.1), or directly by citizens (section 3.2), is the field of community engagement (as distinct from more general participation in civic activities) where practitioners seek to increase levels of citizen participation in civic life. It is, potentially a supporting activity to the democratic decision-making process, but the relationship is complex. It is a process that is carried out by officers (i.e. employees) as opposed to elected representatives, and the outcome should be a network of relationships and intelligence about the needs and interests of that community. It is nominally an information gathering and capacity building activity put in place to support communities and find out more about their needs, but can also be seen as a way of involving citizens in between electoral cycles. In some cases, for example participatory budgeting,¹⁹ the community engagement process can lead to

¹⁹ Participatory Budgeting (PB) involves passing direct control of budget decisions to citizens and was developed in South America (Porto Allegro) in response to a crisis in democratic trust and

decisions, in others the end point of the process is less clear-cut. It is distinct from consultation, which is a more formalised creation of an evidence base for decision-making. Although the distinction between the two activities can often be blurred, the emphasis in each case is different with consultation seeking to create an evidence base of individual opinions, and community engagement involving interacting with a community as a unit not just as individuals. This blurring is problematic for practitioners; for the purposes of this thesis, community engagement is described as a conversation and an on-going relationship as opposed to a one off information gathering exercise.

This creates a tension for practitioners – the practitioner’s stated aim is to engage people in the conversation, but the politicians are not always bound to follow the wishes of the group that has been engaged with. When this happens the practitioner is left with the consequences of these unmet expectations. As has been discussed in previous section many of the difficulties related to community engagement are compounded by an overall reduction in participation in the democratic process which happens in parallel with increased participation in the social web, and the freedom enabled by self-publication online of individual views.

In the present context, the term ‘community’ is used instead of ‘civic’, which is the convention among practitioners in this field. The rest of the chapter explores the term ‘community’ with respect to online community, which refers more conventionally to the social ties within a self-defined group.

participation. An overview of PB in the UK context can be found at:

<http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk> (Retrieved 26.01.13).

There are a typologies that describe the different approaches to community engagement, perhaps the most influential being the Arnstein Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) which describes different levels of citizen engagement in the deliberative process within a truly co-created discourse that allows citizens to engage fully in deliberation, and have power in the process at the top of that ladder, and the overall objective of citizen engagement.

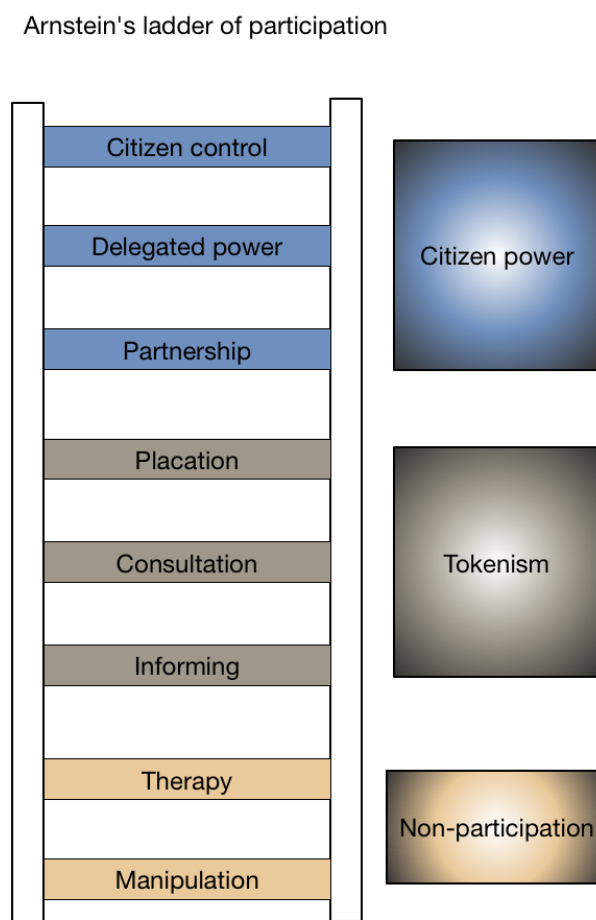


Figure 3.1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

The criticism levelled at these staged theories is that they encourage practitioners to assume that there is a 'best' kind of engagement (Cornwall, 2008), as well as

making it difficult to accommodate the fact that participants may enjoy different levels of involvement in different issues and at different times (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, & Warburton, 2009). Individuals may be highly motivated and engaged over a particular issue, but largely passive about numerous others. Applying a ladder typology to the citizenry as a whole does not allow for these individual differences.

Contemporary literature on community engagement has moved towards citizen-centred approaches (Brodie et al., 2009; Foot, 2009; Pratchett et al., 2009). Such approaches emphasise the need for the power in the relationship to be held by individuals and groups, rather than the state, and are being adopted by practitioners to a greater or lesser extent (Brodie et al., 2009; Cornwall, 2008). This fairly adversarial view of power does not easily support partnership working (Barnes et al., 2008; Cornwall, 2004). In digital and networked environments, relationships are more complicated since issues of place and also public-ness start to affect interactions. In this instance Gaventa's (Gaventa, 2006) power cube is a useful tool to navigate these permutations because it highlights the way that different forms of power interact, and helps to navigate spaces where these forms of power publicly intersect rather than being enacted in discrete spaces:

Figure 1 The 'power cube': the levels, spaces and forms of power

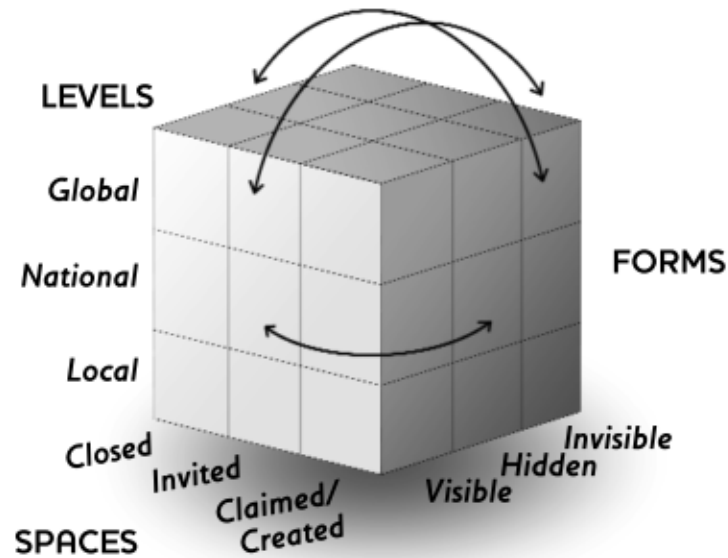


Figure 3.2: Gaventa's Power Cube (Gaventa, 2006)

Current community participation thinking puts people, relationships and power at the centre of the theory around the process of getting more people involved in their communities and in the decision-making process (Brodie et al., 2009). There is increased interest in the 'power of networks' and recent experimentation with, for example, the RSA Connected Communities programme in Peterborough (Jones et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 2011) is engaged with exploring how network thinking applies to community engagement. It explores what this means by putting the individual and his or her actions at the heart of the process of participation rather than assuming that participation can work to an institutional blueprint.

3.4 Co-production

Having established the relevance of community engagement and activist practice, this section considers the form of practice in which co-production plays a central

role. In the context of more networked engagement the concept of co-production is emerging as the focus of practitioner interest, as a tool for redressing the perceived power imbalance between citizens and state (Boyle et al., 2010). The umbrella term “co-production” is used here, and is associated with other more restrictive terms such as co-planning, co-design, co-commissioning, co-managing, co-delivering, co-monitoring and co-evaluating.

Co-production – the idea of all stakeholders participating equally in the decision-making process - is one way to re-imagine the relationship between citizens and government. Methods of co-creation or co-production have been applied to offline community engagement projects for some time, and the participatory nature of the social web makes this a good ‘fit’ with co-productive approaches to engagement. Co-production can be seen as a response to the problem of how to engage citizens in the decision-making process, and is used by a wide range of citizen groups. This raises the question of power - by sharing control of the process in a co-productive process one is sharing control of the outcome and building trust in the outcome to a far greater degree than is possible in a delivered process (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006).

Co-production is used in services more generally to refer to customers co-producing services – for example, you enter numbers on an ATM keypad and co-produce banking services. For a resource-strapped state, co-production has a clear appeal - arguably it is part of the theoretical underpinnings of the Big Society policy (Jones et al., 2010). Government is there to ensure that the process of designing and delivering services that the community wants is legal, fair and

reasonable, and to make sure that its decisions reflect the will of the people at both the micro hyperlocal as well as the macro national levels. Separately, the state might take on the responsibility of delivering services, but the function of government as the arbitrator of the public will is different.

There is evidence that co-production as defined here is already embedded in our civil society, but not as a result of state intervention. There is a great deal of evidence of co-productive civic activism in the *2008-9 Citizenship Survey* (Taylor & Low, 2010), but rather less of consultation and participation as defined by that survey. If activities such as blood or organ donation or even neighbourhood watch participation are included, then the degree of co-production in the UK is extensive (Bovaird, Downe, & Löffler, 2009).

Co-production is a relatively new approach, and there are concerns about how easy it will be to connect to democratic representation. Bovaird (2007) questions whether politicians will be willing to pass power to citizens in this way, and whether politicians will trust the public to describe their own reality or will prefer to rely on a view of their lives as constructed by 'experts'. Bovaird questions how 'scalable' co-production will be for issues such as housing or social care, and suggests more experimentation is needed (Bovaird, 2007).

Co-productive approaches are relevant to the wider issue of the use and sharing of power in society more generally, and to the way in which individuals act both as members of their community and as participants in a decision-making process, and how these acts reflect on and affect their communities.

The state exercises power partly through management of resources, and one of the pressures on current structures is that this power is weakening as resources shrink. The pressure towards more co-productive ways of working is not just economic, it has been emergent in the world of engagement practitioners for several decades and also shares many qualities with the underlying culture of the social web and the Network Society in which we can now be said to live. As the state shrinks, government is looking to develop new ways to work with citizens and, assuming that we value these qualities, these need to be fair and representative of society. These new ways of working with citizens need also to reflect the fact that citizens spend more time online and live in a Network Society. It can be argued that just changing the way governments engage with citizens, or how citizens engage with government, is not enough. Co-production could represent a more engaged and active relationship with the public, but does not bring a form of democratic governance. It does not 'frame' participants as political citizens, but as residents or customers. As co-productive approaches become more popular, it must be remembered they do not necessarily reflect a representative group from the community, and are not linked to forms of democratic decision making within a locality. In order to devolve power to community groups it is necessary to understand how this process interacts with democratic decision-making and the desire of democratic society to ensure that decisions reflect the needs of the whole of the community and not just those who have turned up to act.

There is another sense in which the term co-production is relevant to this discussion, which is its application on participatory design, which allows all users

to be involved in the design of a service, feature or outcome. This is a routinely used approach to design to improve products and services in various commercial fields, and the increasing use of co-creation – of shared development of ideas across wide groups of people – online is becoming endemic.

It can be argued that in order to participate in a co-productive relationship consideration must be given to one other element of community engagement. It is necessary to consider practice and to evaluate communities in terms of the assets and skills they command as opposed to their needs (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). This is the approach applied in Seattle's established community development programme. Case studies of this work are compelling (Diers, 2004). While the literature on co-production examines the need for shared power within the engagement process, the work of Kretzmann, McKnight and others at the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, discusses how to initiate these co-productive relationships using an approach that involves searching out skills and assets in the community. This assets assessment is more action orientated than, for example, the social capital assessment of Participle's Southwark Circles²⁰ or the networked based assessment carried out by the RSA in Peterborough,²¹ although both could be argued to be an assets based approach to community development.

²⁰ <http://www.participle.net/projects/view/5/101/> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

²¹ <http://www.thersa.org/projects/citizen-power> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

3.5. The role of the representative in community engagement

The tension between civic and political participation described in Chapter 2, section 2.7, can be seen also in the relationship between the local elected representative and the community engagement process, when considered with respect to neighbourhood participation. Democratic engagement can be seen as engagement with an elected representative as much as with the process of democracy. The role of the elected representative in the area of community engagement is opaque in that, despite not always being overtly involved in community engagement programmes, the decision-making power ultimately rests with the elected representative. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the role of the elected representative.

Citizen engagement can be the 'elephant in the room'. When describing the role of community ambassador for the Virtual Town Hall project (see Ch. 4) the project team realised that in describing the activities the community ambassador might undertake that (with the exception of the exercise of a representative vote) they were describing the activities related to the role of an elected representative. This tension between active citizens and representatives is more acute at the local than the national level since it is at the former level that these two groups are more likely to interact directly.

The public sees politicians as the 'other' and will claim that 'politicians are not really like us' (Allen & Williamson, 2010). Coleman (2005c) suggests that our current state of dissatisfaction with politicians is linked to the fact that our feeling of representation is indirect - we do not feel directly represented by our

politicians, we feel distant from them (Coleman, 2005c). Coleman suggests that one of the possibilities offered by the Network Society is the opportunity for more direct representation as an alternative to the direct or plebiscite democracy which others (Shulman, 2009) have suggested might be the emergent result of greater use of technology in decision-making.

Setting community expectations with respect to what might happen as a result of greater levels of engagement in the decision-making process is difficult. The absence of politician involvement may conflict with what the politician sees as 'relevant', either because of the scope of the issue (being too small) or because of precedent and relations with some larger set of issues (the politician may have a broader overview of the issues). In addition, the mere fact of engagement may conflict with the politician's opinion of the majority view, and controversial issues may be resolved in favour of the political perception, elevating the specific issue to one of replacing rather than 'engaging' the representative. While not certain, since it is accompanied by other issues such as the lack of elected representative involvement, it can be argued that more co-productive approaches along the lines discussed above, might address these issues by including the opportunity to act within the process of engagement. There is no guarantee that these processes will produce a decision or outcome that is representative of the whole community - the very issue that democratic decision-making exists to overcome. With the public increasingly able to debate and act independently of the institutions and process of government, the role of the representative is one that we may need to rethink, and which should include consideration of how we support and resource community decision-making.

The combination of perceived scarcity of participation by politicians in the process of an engagement cycle that has been increasingly professionalised, and the increased use of co-productive techniques, creates tension between community engagement and political participation. Where community engagement is carried out by third sector organisations this can be seen as a useful part of the political communication process (Coleman & Shane, 2011). Where this work is carried out by bureaucrats, the drift between political discourse and community engagement activity becomes acute and difficult to reconcile for the public.

Community engagement work often focuses on goals such as reach, i.e. how many people are involved in the process, or individual impact, i.e. whether participants feel 'empowered' as a result of taking part. It is rarely that an engagement exercise is measured in terms of its impact on policy making, partly because the very different cycles of decision-making and engagement work make this difficult, but also because of a more subtle issue. Community engagement practitioners do not tend to consider political decision-making outcomes to be part of their remit. My experience shows that most practitioners see their work with communities as being 'under the radar' with respect to the politicians, and see it as operating as a parallel activity.

My experience shows also that politicians are extremely sensitive to what they see as implied criticism in the form of community engagement, and tend to believe that their election gives them both a decision-making mandate as well as on-going intelligence about what the community thinks. Research such as the *Hansard*

Society Audit of Political Engagement challenges this belief and the evidence on voter turnout would indicate that politicians have the mandate of only a minority of their communities through active electoral engagement. In practical terms we are left with a set of contradictions:

- engagement practitioners forge a relationship with the groups known as 'hard to reach' and²² focus on them rather than the wider public since politicians tend to claim ownership over the relationships with any citizen who can be considered a voter. They know that the worst of all worlds is 'engaging' with a group whose feedback will not be listened to and so try to protect their process and relationships from this. The upshot is that communities cannot be asked anything meaningful which has the advantage that they are not disappointed. The mantra 'setting expectations' is repeated in order to avoid confronting the issue and dealing with the political system;
- politicians remain confident that they are representing their communities despite having been elected usually by only a minority of the electorate;
- active and engaged people are already getting on doing what they want to do, and see the public sector as irrelevant, overly complex or, worse, a barrier, to what they want to achieve. They reject the idea of 'political'

²² "Hard to reach" is a term used by practitioners to describe groups who may find it difficult to participate in mainstream political debate because of socio-economic factors. It is a difficult group to define in that 'hard' is a relative term and in many cases it is biased towards the practitioner's views on inequality or social exclusion. It is a term frequently employed to identify groups who do not participate in engagement or consultation without specific interventions.

involvement and, though they often make progress, they are not usually concerned with how representative government is of their whole community.

These statements, of course, are something of a caricature. There are excellent examples of 'good' engagement and 'good' politicians, and approaches such as participatory budgeting or citizen juries can address some of the tensions highlighted here. There are also many councillors who are active in talking openly with their communities. However, my experience suggests that this is not the norm. When talking to other practitioners the prevailing view is that active communities tend to reject rather than embrace involvement with mainstream politics as defined by involvement with elected politicians, except as a last resort. Further, it is questionable whether or not active communities would define their activity as political – even though to elected politicians it seems so. Evidence supporting this view includes the 2011 *Pathways to Participation Research* (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, Ellis & Warburton 2010) which finds that “government policy never described as a motivating factor by the interviewees, and any influence was reported negatively: the imposition of government agendas and intentions on people’s existing activities, for example, was viewed as politicising their participation and was almost unanimously rejected”. This echoes the findings in the ‘*Networked Neighbourhood Research report*’ (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a) and the *Hansard Audit of Political Engagement* (Williamson et al., 2011).

This review of community engagement theory suggests a need for its re-examination from the perspective of how community power is being influenced by

social changes and the adoption of new modalities of communication such as social web technologies. It differs from the field of political communication, which examines the impact of digital technologies, but not always in the context of overarching social change. Chapter 6 (section 6.4) describes the empirical work undertaken to investigate how civic uses of social media might be utilised in order to positively affect the process and theory of community engagement.

3.6 Social networking sites and community

Both community engagement theory and practice, and political communication could be re-examined in order to reveal how positive changes might be affecting these fields rather than looking back to more established behaviours in order to critique the current state of the field. A key theme of this section is the appropriateness of existing social web tools to address community engagement objectives on the one hand, and political mobilisation and participation on the other. This examination involves the essential element of understanding the emergent culture of the social web and the collapse of context (discussed in Ch. 2) which means that individuals act within multiple manifestations of self, bridging personal, civic and political behaviours, and that this is further conflated within the overlap among personal timelines and previous as well as current senses of self that are persistently available. Arguably, it is the failure of both areas of thinking to acknowledge the now co-existence of the 'other' which weakens their analysis, and changes in the nature of personal identity which are brought about by digital technologies create the need for this co-existence to be acknowledged.

Democracy is an expression of the individual in society in which the belief that every individual matters is central. This makes the identity and actions of the individual central to any debate on democratic participation. With respect to informal participation – and by extension, community engagement - identity still matters since it is a vital piece of context in conversation whether established by digital footprint or physical presence. This is complicated by the fact that we cannot easily separate our different contexts and personas, and that identity online is malleable (Turkle, 1997) which is at odds with it needing to be able to accommodate the democratic imperative for accountability. An understanding of what individual identity means for citizens, both as spectators and as content creators that shape places online, is intrinsic to an understanding of digital civic space.

Underlying the discussion on hyperlocal activity, introduced in Chapter 1 and discussed in greater detail later in this chapter (see section 3.9), and the corollary to the largely offline practice of community engagement, is the arena of online community. Within the behaviours and culture found within the ‘networked publics’ (Boyd, 2010) on sites such as Facebook, there is often greater depth of interaction within more discrete spaces and more bounded environments. Online communities have existed since the Internet was conceived – initially through programs such as listserv and other email based services, then via bulletin boards and finally in forums and communities - and have played a significant role in the lives of participants (Rheingold, 1993). This section and the next discuss how “communities of place” might relate to local decision-making and discusses

qualities such as 'digital civic spaces', examined in Chapter four, which have been created and are owned by citizens rather than being built by government, as is the case with their offline equivalents.

The Internet has provided the opportunity for like-minded people to come together to talk about the ideas and issues which are important to them, but which might be difficult to unearth and connect to physically. The Well was one of the first online communities, and promoted a vibrant and varied set of conversations and relationships which connected a diverse group of people (Rheingold, 1993). Throughout the 1990s, the research focus in this area was on communities of interest - the fact that it was possible to discuss topics as diverse as knitting patterns and philosophy. with someone on the other side of the world. Much of the activity in these spaces was around specific interests, with the sense of community engendered being an offshoot of these interests rather than a result of physical proximity, which is central to understanding of the term community with respect to community engagement discussed earlier. These online communities were the foundations on which the current social networking is based:

The rise of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) indicates a shift in the organization of Online Communities. While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests. Early public Online Communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or "egocentric") networks, with the individual at the center of their own community. This more accurately mirrors unmediated social structures, where "the world is composed of networks, not groups" (Wellman, 1988, p. 37). The introduction of SNS features has introduced a new organizational framework for Online Communities, and with it, a vibrant new research context. (Ellison & Boyd, 2008, p. 10)

Proximity did have an effect with respect to early online communities such as the Well, and Rheingold (Rheingold, 1998, p. 367) talks of 'real world' support for members who needed help or restaurant reviews on Usenet however proximity was secondary to the main description of these as communities of interest.

Belonging to an online community has an enormous personal impact on the individual – the benefits of socialisation and information sharing are common also to the offline community, but the advantage of online is the persistent availability of the community (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1997). Some of the most compelling case studies come from the third sector where carers and patients can obtain support and understanding from a network of people uniquely able to empathise with their situation (Rheingold 1994). The positive effects of these communities have been well documented and can be seen in communities such as Mumsnet, which is a community of parents, and Breast Cancer Care, which runs a forum for people with cancer, for cancer survivors and for carers. These sites have become significant online destinations for their participants and have developed the attributes of physical spaces.

For isolated individuals, for example, new mothers living at a distant from family, these kinds of sites provide connection and support which is not easily available offline. Netmums has hosted Q&A sessions for aspiring prime ministers and provided evidence to select committees (Pearce, 2001) though this is a relatively new development with one of the founders of Netmums commenting that Its role as an advocate and a destination for policy makers has grown over the time the site has been in operation (Coleman 2004).

The ability to create communities online is central to the growth of social media in general. Only recently has the take up of these tools been so extensive as to make create communities of place as well as the communities of interest described here. The next section discusses communities of place in more detail.

3.7 Creating digital ‘place’

The pervasive use of digital and networked technologies is making the location of content and content users more relevant to the discussion of online community. It is the emergence of community of place that is promoting interest in these technologies at both local and national government levels. Because local democracy is organised geographically and in relatively small units - consider, for example, parish councils - communities of place are important to how it functions. Decisions about resources and policy are made on a geographical basis, and participation in these decisions requires individuals to reach outside their areas of interest to interact with other residents who are less likely to share their views. Local democracy is concerned with places and ‘local’ and ‘place’ are often contested concepts, with communities defining places on their own terms. This makes it difficult to discuss what local means without discussion about the nature of place and space both online and offline, because local is as much a state of mind and of narrative as it is a geographic descriptor. This section introduces a definition of place that is discussed in later sections as an aspect of digital spaces and the effects that this might have on the construction of digital civic spaces.

Massey (Massey, 2005) describes place as space which has been given meaning. She makes a distinction between place and local place as residing in the narratives of the people who consider themselves local to that place. According to Massey 'place' is defined by the narrative of the space that is described over time – in her words 'place' is a 'space' which has been given meaning. If space and, therefore, place, cannot be considered to be bounded, then the story and the relationships within a place are as essential to it as the geographical location. Thus, no place exists in isolation and we can absorb a much more holistic view of what a place actually is.

In the context of this description, local digital civic space could be defined as a space collecting together local narratives and opinion about local civic issues. It might also have a deeper narrative about personal memories or history, which create strong emotional ties to places. Grounding the Network Society in the idea of place is possible once we accept the reality of the interactions we see online in terms of their ability to build community (Bovaird, 2007; Chmiel et al., 2011; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 2001), and provides a different perspective related to the Internet Galaxy which Castells (Castells, 2001) describes on a global scale.

The relationships and social mores of the usually multiple communities that live in a place become embedded in the description of that place, along with the history and temporal narratives of the elements that Massey (Massey, 2005) refers to when she describes what place means. This thesis is concerned with 'local' place and, in the absence of any meaningful bounding of space, Massey leaves the definition of local to the people who describe it. Therefore, the distinction between

place and local place lies in the narratives of the people who consider themselves to be local to that place. Within the discussion of the Network Society these narratives of place are created within networks, and may involve the layering of definition and description through different networks co-terminus with the discussed place.

3.8 Communities of place

Communities of place can exemplify the issues of context collapse described in Chapter two section 2.4.2, since the individual's participation is often social, civic and political within the same arena. This challenges both political and civic participation, which in an offline context do not intersect in the same way. It can also be problematic for the definition of place since if place is described with respect to its narratives then use of the term 'community of place' in a discussion of online resources contains an assumption that people publicly 'opt in' to a single shared description of local where they may be operating in social and separate ways. It is this affinity for (or allegiance to) the shared narrative of what 'local' means that perhaps is the most substantive claim to the idea that localities can give rise to digital civic spaces. This provides an opportunity to define the locality of community while at the same time providing a potential battleground for different communities to struggle over the same space – what is the solution if two communities cite their narratives and, therefore, locality claims over the digital space? Web spaces that promote these competing narratives are largely informal; they are managed by a handful of people and largely reflect these individuals' views of the world. In addition, the effect of context collapse and the overlap

between civic and political participation described in Chapter two creates additional complexities for considering the relationships between communities of place and local democratic participation.

With respect to the democratic impact of these websites, it is important to recall that informal organisations are not necessarily representative - these are informal digital civic spaces. While these open and accessible digital places present the opportunity for more direct connection between citizen and representative, they are not of themselves representative of a community. This becomes problematic for two reasons:

1. as multiple sites occur within the same geography there is competition to create the narrative of the location (in my research I found one village with three websites all claiming to be the 'official' village website);
2. because politicians feel lack of connection to the citizen they may attribute disproportionate value to the comments and opinions in these more visible and accessible spaces.

A description of place as a multiplicity with collapsed context and layered narratives, which intrinsically involves its participants and can co-exist with its virtual self, is very different from the fairly sterile way that many writers describe the overlay of technology on the places in which we live. It may be the more recent impacts of more social technologies, or it may be the fact that so many Network Society thinkers are infected with an age of enlightenment view of the world as an

inherently rational place, but discussion of narrative in an environment where the participants 'write themselves into being' (Boyd, 2002) has more resonance than Mitchell's (Mitchell, 1995) description of a future of closed and gated communities facilitated by online networks, or Negroponte's (Negroponte, 1996) technoutopian views of a world where we have sanitised so many of our interactions through technological mediation.

In deepening our understanding of this phenomenon, the term hyperlocal (see next section) and exploration of these websites as digital civic spaces, take on a richer meaning than the practitioner would usually give it. Hyperlocal also relates to Massey's (Massey, 2005, p. 91) multiplicity in the narrative of place, and the intrinsic involvement of the community relationships which it holds. The unbounded nature of place, in common with other space, brings with it conflicts of competing interests and competing definitions of local that at some point need to be reconciled if we are to manage to co-exist with the many hyperlocal communities living alongside us.

Participation in a community of place is an act of participation in civil society (Hampton & Wellman, 2001) and as will be shown in Chapter 6 is not yet a commonplace occurrence, which means that these spaces are unlikely to be representative of the place as a whole. By participating in this way, the individual is connecting and interacting with his or her community as described by the shared narrative and, as such, this kind of participation must be considered to be part of the individual's identity as a citizen. It is not necessarily an expression of the individual's political identity - participants in civic activities are more likely to

be motivated to participate for reasons of sociability or perhaps by the community, but are unlikely to be motivated politically (Brodie et al., 2010). It is this social capital - built on civic and social interactions – that creates the environment that enables the democratic process (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Putnam, 2000). In an extension of Habermas's very literal view of the public sphere, it has been argued that it is only with the support of cultural social capital that the public sphere can flourish (Norris, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

The next section addresses the effects of newer more networked technologies, and new behaviours in the discussion of communities of place.

3.9 Hyperlocal - An emergent Network Society?

There is no single definition of hyperlocal website, and the term is often used to refer to media activity. Rather than simply to refer to a form of journalism the term 'hyperlocal' is used here to describe a collection of activities and an emergent 'norm' within an increasingly networked society with several shared characteristics:

- the creator and participants are active in the sense of 'participatory culture';
- there is a clear intent to connect to the local community – though both local and community are defined by the site creators;
- use of Web 2.0 technologies.

Radcliffe (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 9) defines it as "Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other, small geographically defined

community". This lack of a single definition extends also to interpretations of the intent of these sites with respect to community engagement or political communication, and introduces the risk that these sites are being interpreted as being filled with a communicative intent, for which there is no evidence. Within the scope of this thesis a slightly wider definition is proposed. In being situated within the social web these sites bring with them the issues of context collapse discussed in the previous section and, thus, present the same challenges to civic and political participation.

There are the beginnings of a hyperlocal movement in the UK which uses Web 2.0 technologies (Harte, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012). However, it seems that most local websites are not part of this movement in terms of their values or technology and the content creators are simply creating a community resource on their own terms. The motivations for this activity are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The Network Society is being manifested within local communities in the form of interactive citizen managed websites. Hyperlocal has passed into practitioner use in the UK to describe grass roots communities that organise online, while being focused on a defined geographical area. The current interest in hyperlocal activity is also demonstrated more directly in this space by commercial actors such as Northcliffe Media which is one of the larger publishers of local newspapers in the UK (Thurman, Pascal, & Bradshaw, 2011). There are also organisations that are developing new business models, such as nOice.com and BeLocal, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter six.

Informal civic groups have always self-managed, and there are many examples in the third sector of groups with charters of membership and process - for example the Women's Institute and the worldwide Scouting movement. More relevantly, there are also countless examples of heritage trusts set up around buildings or landscapes, which conform to a place based definition of civic. Hyperlocal websites may or may not be linked to established offline activities, and local websites which have been created to support 'traditional' civic participation may or may not have the interactive element that signals their participation in the social web.

The key points are community, the link to an actual place and the underlying sense of civic purpose. This idea builds on the previous section on community more generally. The 'hyper' in relation to the local refers to the fact that these communities tend to be formed around areas that are considerably smaller than any democratic decision-making unit – the exception being the parish level. There is no technological commonality across these sites - they use different tools and different platforms, and range between bulletin boards and blogs to sites using more social tools. There are people who still hand code their HTML although this is dying out fast now that the social web is made up of WYSIWYG tools. The unifying themes are location and the idea of civic purpose and community.

It should be noted that the term hyperlocal is used differently in the US with a greater emphasis on citizen journalism and the replacement of local news services, which differs from the UK practitioner definition described above. At the time of writing there was debate within the practitioner community about whether these

hyperlocal sites are part of the local media ecosystem (i.e. closer to the US view) or whether instead they are a form of civic action. This categorisation may be important for the future development of this new environment since their description as part of the media space brings with it the risk/opportunity of both regulation and more funded support. The difficulty in proposing any kind of categorisation at this stage is the emergent nature and fragility of these sites. In many ways this tension echoes the tension between political participation as being an act of community engagement or an act of political communication. In the digital environment it is possible to categorise actions as both of these and to have a collapse of these different contexts into one that centres around the actors, including the technology, instead of the external audience.

The significance of these sites within this thesis - irrespective of the contextual analysis used - is as an exemplar of some form of civic participation against a backdrop of concern for the way that the public is failing to participate in more traditional channels, that is, the issue of democratic deficit.

3.9.1 Evidence of hyperlocal activity in the UK

The most comprehensive evidence in the UK is the 2010 study by Keith Harris and Hugh Flouch (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a). The research looked at three hyperlocal websites in London, Harringay Online, East Dulwich Forum and Brockley Central. I was a member the advisory board for the project and know the research team would acknowledge that this was not a definitive study – it proved too wide a topic for the time/resources available. However, the findings are robust and

substantiated and so are relevant here. The study provides a number of findings, but the underlying result is substantial benefits for community cohesion and social capital connected to participation in a hyperlocal website - there was a sense that social capital is pooled, visibly, and can be drawn on for individual or collective need. Positive effects were found also with respect to belonging and attachment, and excellent results were found for communication and information sharing. Another area of benefit was relationships with the councils and collective self-efficacy.

With respect of the idea of informal civic participation, the study looked at the case sites for some connection with formal democratic processes. A review of their content showed a “strong commitment to local involvement” (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a, p. 16). The nomenclatures vary, but the basic premise of a discernible difference between informal and formal civic engagement is demonstrated by the research. The report states that “It seems likely that local websites can both stimulate and reflect a latent demand for informal opportunities for collective involvement, very much on a dip-in dip-out basis.” (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a, p. 16). This was also reflected also in the way that the local councils used the sites to give early information to residents – i.e. on issues that were not in the formal information realm.

The study concludes by saying that “Those who have sought the revival of democracy in mechanical processes like voting, petitions and scrutiny might do well to examine the way this fertile mix of content nurtures an agitated, involved

democracy of everyday life.” (The Online Networked Neighbourhoods Study, date, p.1)

The term democracy here could be misleading – or at least needs some clarification since the participants are not showing no interest at all in politics. A good example of this is the exchange quoted below from one of the time slices of content:

I'd rather this thread didn't turn into a bun-fight between Labour and the LibDems. James, Vikki.....I'm looking in your direction. Please conduct yourselves with some decorum and debate the issue at hand rather than trying to score cheap political points. As PeckhamRose says, this is exactly the sort of stuff that turns people away from politics, even at a local level. This thread poses some interesting points about shared services and efficiencies of scale - why not start there?"

Much of what we looked at within this study is civic rather than democratic (though there are examples where the council had undertaken a formal process within the hyperlocal site) and it is actively non-party political indicating this being civic rather than political participation. The exception was East Dulwich where Councillor James Barber provides a constituency surgery service on the site; however, this is not in and of itself a decision-making process and remains within the civic realm – albeit provided by a democratically elected representative.

3.9.2 Who is in charge? Representativeness

These sites are public – they are open to anyone who wants to join, and they are clearly a valuable community resources for anyone who participates – but it is also true to say that this publicness does not make them representative of their areas

(though they may be representative of the participating community). This is highlighted in the Networked Neighbourhoods study (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010b). These sites function extremely well in the informal civic realm and it would be easy to stifle the vital social element by imposing too much structure; where reliance is on volunteers they need to be provided with adequate resources or allowed to organise as they wish. There is no compulsion for these digital civic spaces to be democratic if they do not want to be – though some route into the democratic process would be useful if participants want their views to be taken into account by decision makers. It is also an open question whether these sites will be sustainable over the longer term without their accountability and governance processes being formalized in some way.

These sites are not representative of their location – and there is no imperative for them to be. The study does show that some kind of relationship with the representative is both productive and perceived positively from all sides. As quoted above, 21% of (citizen) respondents said that participation on their site had changed their attitude towards council officers for the better. Twice as many (42%) said that their attitude towards local councillors had changed for the better. This is echoed by officers and elected representatives; among elected representatives, 42% found neighbourhood sites to be ‘mostly constructive and useful’ and 41% described them as ‘somewhat constructive and useful’. For officers the respective figures are 41% and 47%.

Communities of interest, communities of place and hyperlocal websites are all examples of user generated activity and participation. These communities are

created and managed by participants with varied and often unknown motives. They do not ask for or need participation from government, they are not examples of 'eParticipation' discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.1. Once place becomes a consideration in the formation of communities, participants usual look beyond their social circles for wider engagement. The next section relates these sites to the idea of civic space.

3.10. Online civic spaces – not entirely new

The qualities of digital civic space can be considered with respect to offline equivalents. For example, council chambers throughout the UK demonstrate a multitude of different designs, all intended to support the idea of democratic debate and leadership, from the imposing industrial grandeur of Huddersfield and Kingston upon Hull to the stately home formality of the council chamber of Devon County Council and the more modern and modest attempts to achieve flexible space and reuse space exemplified by South Oxfordshire District. These physical spaces have been actively designed, and the role of the public considered – in the main part through the addition of a public gallery that relegates the public to the role of distant spectator. However, these spaces should be considered democratic rather than civic in nature.

Civic is a word that has been re-appropriated over recent years in the UK and is often associated with civic centres and symbols of the state. The use of the word in this thesis is deliberate, but is not meant to echo those civic centres. Civic space is

created by communities and not necessarily deliberately designed as civic spaces, but are rather 'claimed' or re-purposed.

The initial assumption underlying this research was that what was needed in order to connect online activity with democratic decision-making was for government to create some kind of democratic structure online - the first case for this thesis research The Virtual Town Hall which is described in Chapter 5. In the course of the research it became clear that government has not been successful at building digital civic spaces online, and that it is the exception rather than the rule that people participate in deliberative conversations hosted by government. In contrast to the failure of what might be termed a 'top down' approach to online deliberation, there is growing evidence that people are creating their own spaces (Bruns & Humphreys, 2007; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a; Rustema, 2001). This contrast motivated an interest in developing a concept of what these spaces might look like in the future, and exploring the characteristics of the spaces that have already been built - with or without government involvement. Power shapes participatory spaces (Gaventa, 2006) and this can be seen if we reflect on the way that the design of a council chamber, for example, seeks to keep the public confined to a passive observational role. Online, the members of public do not have to populate deliberative spaces chosen for them - they can create and populate their own spaces.

Authors such as Coleman and Sunstein discuss digital civic space from a political engagement point of view, and others such as Massey and Mitchell have discussed the implications of moving offline civic interactions online. Boyd's (Boyd, 2010)

concept of networked publics examines the effect of people gathering in public spaces online, and the empirical work described in Chapter 6 of this thesis, explores what this 'public-ness' might mean in a civic context. In this context 'civic' refers to a discussion of community rather than democratic purpose. Bruns and Swift (Bruns & Swift, 2010) discussed the need for 'citizen to citizen' engagement and the political benefits of creating new networked channels. This thesis seeks to extend this discussion by examining the effect of creating digital civic space at the geographical local level - perhaps for a village or even a street within a larger town - and by examining how this digital civic space might relate to the local democratic process. In doing so, it is proposed that these hyperlocal websites can be considered Digital civic spaces, while acknowledging that how to utilise them as part of the democratic conversation is not yet clear. The vital element of these sites is discussed in succeeding following chapters of this thesis. It is that these hyperlocal sites have been created and are managed by their participants and not by the state. This is a condition that creates both limitations and opportunities for interactions with formal structures.

Chapter 4 draws a distinction between formal and informal interactions and points out that there are deficits in the citizen generated site approach that make it difficult to directly involve these sites in democratic decision-making even while these 'features' might be considered a strength with respect to informal participation. For example, there is no requirement for these spaces to be representative of the whole community. Cornwall (Cornwall, 2004) identifies this lack of representativeness as a weakness with respect to what she refers to as invited and public spaces, and it is a frequently noted concern with respect to the

digital inclusion agenda and the greater levels of participation online of more affluent groups (Dutton & Blank, 2011). Lack of representativeness is a persistent concern within the participation literature and it can be argued to be a no more acute issue, but only more measurable, online. Data from research bodies such as OFCOM and the Oxford Internet Institute indicate that the majority of people of working age will be online and using social media by 2020 assuming current patterns of growth and adoption persist. This does not account for use by 'silver surfers' (older generation Internet users) and of course does not take account of what happens if Internet users make further shifts in their behaviour such as has happened with Facebook. It is possible that take up of mobile or use of real-time/augmented reality might change. Suppose that this baseline projection is realistic. It then constitutes a realistic planning horizon for government to ensure it is there to greet people as they arrive. Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 463) describes an obligation to consider our rights and duties as citizens as well as consumers, and considers this to be relevant to democratic participation and social well-being:

This does not mean that people have to be thinking about public affairs all, most, or even much of the time. But it does mean that each of us has rights and duties as citizens, not simply as consumers. As we will see, active citizen engagement is necessary to promote not only democracy but social well-being too. And in the modern era, one of the most pressing obligations of a citizenry that is not inert is to ensure that "deliberative forces should prevail over the arbitrary. (Sunstein, 2009, p. 463)

In contrasting this duty with respect to online as opposed to offline interactions, Sunstein highlights the greater propensity for homogeneity online and the risk that this presents for a less diverse perspective. His view is that real-world interactions

are more likely to force us to interact with diversity if our virtual experience is likely to be more homogenous (Sunstein, 2009, p. 513).

Sunstein articulates the danger of “group polarization” - an effect where groups, over time, become a more extreme version of themselves. Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 630) describes this as happening because people want the positive reinforcement of group agreement - even if the group view is slightly more extreme than their own. This is bad news for deliberative democracy if it means that people do not come into contact with a wide range of ideas. Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 786) discusses this risk referring to it as ‘enclave’ deliberation where people only talk with others who more or less agree with them. He refers to the specific benefits of online over offline deliberation and points out that some enclave deliberation can be considered positive in offering the opportunity for minority positions to be developed that might be suppressed in larger debate:

There is a valuable lesson about possible uses of communications technologies to produce convergence, and possibly even learning, among people who disagree with one another. If people hear a wide range of arguments, they are more likely to be moved in the direction of those who disagree with them, (Sunstein, 2009, p. 854)

The inherent assumption in this statement is that we change our minds based on the arguments that we hear. This is not always true, and groups and networks do not always behave rationally as indicated, for example, by research into crowd behaviour at mass gatherings (Zeitz, Tan, Grief, Couns, & Zeitz, 2009). The danger of an ‘age of enlightenment’ analysis of the public sphere is that it fails to take into account the occasions when groups behave for emotional, social or purely

biological reasons. Anthropologists, for example, take a very different view of group behaviours with Dunbar (Dunbar, 2010, p. 214) suggesting that the average number of people with which we can have an emotional connection is around 150 and that beyond that we need social structures to negotiate the interactions in bigger groups. The significance of Dunbar's number with respect to online behaviour has not been fully explored, but attracted a lot of attention when the book was published, when it was correlated to the average number of 'friends' on Facebook. The ties between groups and individuals that Dunbar describes go beyond intellectual connections - and this analysis of community needs also to be considered when we look at how the Network Society affects our neighbourhoods and the places we live in.

3.10.1 Different models of civic space

Coleman and Blumler (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) proposed the creation of a '*civic commons in cyberspace*' to provide a location for deliberative democratic discussion online. They describe a space that is run by an arms-length government organisation that facilitates reactions and deliberations from citizens. They propose this as a possible response to the failure of the press to provide a space for deliberation and debate around politics, and as recognition of the importance of deliberation as a part of the decision-making process. They both emphasise the need for moderation in terms of 'civilising' cyberspace and describe this civic commons as an extension of the consultation and engagement activities undertaken by government. At the time that this idea of a civic commons was mooted by Coleman and Blumler (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) , there had been

experiments in this area by local government via, amongst other routes, the eDemocracy National Project (Macintosh et al., 2004), and also by the Hansard Society which sought means for supporting Select Committees with online forums and discussions (Pearce, 2001). What was not being discussed at this point, was citizen content creation and political blogging was only beginning to emerge as a challenge to the mainstream media; little content was being created at the local community level at that time.

More recent work on this puts a greater emphasis on the importance of the 'blogosphere' as central to democratic conversation (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Dutton, 2007; Hindman, 2009; Karpf, 2010a) and the growth in the use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter, describe a very different landscape to that on which earlier work was based (An, Cha, Gummadi, & Crowcraft, 2011). Facebook and Twitter can be argued to be distinct from blog sites in that their emphasis (from the point of view of the participant as opposed to the designer) is content sharing whereas blogs emphasise broadcast communication with interactive features. Different technologies have different social effects online, and to treat them all as a single social web is to underestimate the range of activity.

Coleman and Blumler (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) make a case as to why online activity - of any kind - is the most appropriate route for creating what Coleman (Coleman, 2005c) went on to call new forms of 'direct representation' where democracy is an on-going conversation and not just something that people engage with during elections. Coleman and Blumler (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) propose that this infrastructure would be best created and managed by a government

funded organisation - connected to but not controlled by government - and in fact cite this connection with government as being required to ensure participants' trust in the space. At the time they were writing, an alternative in the form of communities creating their own websites, was nascent, and their later work (Blumler & Coleman, 2009) reflects the growth that we have seen in relevant user generated content which prompted them to talk about the need for forms of government that are better able to listen to these new forms of community conversation.

This belief that a government managed project will automatically engender trust combined with lack of acknowledgement of citizens creating community websites for themselves, are the two ideas that most clearly date this proposal as having been created before the growth of Internet and subsequent social networking participation.

Ideas of co-production and user production of content are far more in evidence at the time of writing this thesis, and the wider effects on national media and political decision-making of a rapidly moving, unregulated and highly networked public commentary is now widely accepted if not yet understood. What is more, there is a body of work that shows that government led eDemocracy sites have rarely succeeded in engendering debate (Chadwick, 2011; Macintosh, 2006a; Pratchett & Wingfield, 2005).

One problem with the idea of creating dedicated websites for democratic participation lies in discussing websites as destinations rather than feeds and

individual control. This does not reflect the 'state of the art' in terms of website development at the time of writing - with far more people having an online presence, information services are much orientated to getting content to the individual rather than driving traffic to a specific website. Technologies such as RSS and other subscription mechanisms, mean that individuals expect to be able to participate from wherever they are rather than necessarily having to visit a specific destination. The media landscape is increasingly fractured and our attention is diffused through many different channels and locations. This, combined with the sharing of content, which is an embedded feature of the social web, and the fact that increased acknowledgement of the 'publicness' of online content mean that conversation can and does start anywhere. The effect of this is that rather than deliberative debate happening in the managed and appropriate environment that Coleman and others describe, these types of conversations are springing up in a myriad locations (see Ch. 6).

Sunstein, who also discusses the idea of a networked digital civic space, attempts to balance these tensions that arise in the attempt to achieve a democratic environment within an essentially commercially funded space. In order to do so, Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 171) explores the convergence between citizen and consumer, and uses this distinction to discuss the differences in individual capacity and the choices between these different roles. Sunstein reconnects the two roles when he talks about freedom of speech:

The fundamental concern of this book is to see how unlimited consumer options might compromise the preconditions of a system of freedom of

expression, which include unchosen exposures and shared experiences. (Sunstein, 2009, p. 1771)

The assumption of the 'freedom' of the Internet can really only be sustained if we have government in place to ensure this is the case (Morozov, 2011). The World Wide Web was founded on a principle of free and open data and, despite the fact that infrastructure growth and development are now driven by consumer activity rather than by government or social funding, these first design assumptions continue to influence the online culture. Freedom of speech is an essential element of the western democratic ideal, as are our consumer freedoms. There is a difference between freedom in a consumer context and freedom in a democratic context. In the following quote Sunstein (suggests that consumer freedom is about access and choice while democratic freedom is about equality and openness and controls on public debate risk impairing the process of deliberation: "Controls on public debate are uniquely damaging because they impair the process of deliberation that is a precondition for political legitimacy." (Sunstein, 2009, p. 1816)

This is not to imply an absence of all control - government is required both not to interfere and to ensure that debate is kept within the bounds of the law which it is there to create and uphold. This requirement, and the existence of a representative democratic system, mean that there are considerable restrictions on the way in individuals can behave online. A site that is moderated in order to ensure that all views expressed are reasonable and representative has considerably less energy than one with less considered content unless the writers are skilled. Some controls

are essential in the face of consumer driven media; the question is how light can a light touch be within the confines and context of a government site.

Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 2205) suggests that the responsibility for balancing these tensions should rest with the citizen or the citizen collective, and that cultural changes are needed in order to support democratic deliberation of this nature. He describes some of the conditions for democratic debate online with 'speakers' having access to a diverse public and also institutions, suggesting not only laws, but also a culture of free expression

Sunstein's analysis, in *Republic 2.0*, of the issues raised by instigating a deliberative process online puts emphasis on the "moral suasion" of government as a significant effect. This online environment is currently disconnected from the state and, as such, seems an unlikely route to creating a culture of online deliberation. Rather than moral interventions it may be more appropriate for government to support a change in culture in other ways – for example, by opening itself to listening responsively to the outcomes of well-run deliberations even if these are run outside of government. This might mean finding a way to integrate constructive web spaces into the decision-making process, and engaging with the deliberation where it is happening rather than attempting to host the debate itself. The measure of 'constructive' is subjective, but no more complex than the editorial judgements that we currently rely on within, for example, state run media.

When relating this analysis of the online environment to the Habermasian construct of the public sphere discussed in Chapter 2, Coleman and Blumler in

their vision of a civic commons draw a distinction between governance and government, seeing the former as having the greater need for co-production. Their vision of civic commons is one that encompasses the idea of intersecting networks and the belief that this space should and could be brought together by any agency connected to government needs careful examination since the evidence is that government has had little success at achieving this in other forms.

Both Coleman and Blumler (Blumler & Coleman, 2001, p. 20) and Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 2203) conclude with the view that the most important element of a civic commons will be the citizens - it is vital that they are engaged as articulate and informed actors rather than spectators or cyphers within the conversation; this view is considered in Chapter 4 in the discussion of design criteria for digital civic space.

3.10.2 Place matters

The term 'community' is used within local government to refer to groups with demonstrable ties and connections as well as to refer more loosely to the residents of a local area as a decision-making unit. This is the definition of community adopted in this thesis and is used irrespective of any evidence (or lack thereof) of community as described in the sense discussed in section 3.8. This understanding of community is based on electoral boundaries and often on pre-existing communities related to the former definition. With respect to Digital civic space online the question of locality is central in order to define the community (in its wider sense) to which the space relates. This is not to rule out the idea of digital

civic spaces dedicated to topics or groups, but where a space is concerned with 'local' decision-making then some definition of 'local' in geographic terms is essential to orient participants and also to ensure that a clear path to decision-making is created since decisions tend to be organised in relation to geography at the local level. This principle is important also with respect to connecting online and offline activity since participation in both realms will be part of the political decision-making process.

Digital civic spaces, when considered with respect to local democracy, are connected to a specific geographical location. This connection to place draws a distinction between the digital civic space and a networked public; in Boyd's definition (Boyd, 2010), networked publics are not connected to a geographically defined place or 'tethered' to a location in the physical world. Civic spaces are potentially different from networked publics in that they are created and participated in with the intent to connect to a geographical community - even if the individual motivations of the civic participants creating much of the content are more diverse. Where the community is one of place then the corresponding digital civic space is tethered to this place, as discussed earlier in this section.

This requirement to link the online and offline 'geography' is necessary for place related decision-making which, in the main, is the work of local government in the UK. While boundaries and descriptions do change over time, offline space can be clearly segmented and bounded. This is a more difficult process online where it is generally acknowledged that one of the profound effects of technology is the removal of boundaries of place. Digital civic spaces must therefore make reference

to the physical space they are concerned with if they are to support local decision-making.

There is a practical problem with this approach, which was identified in Chapter 2. There is a divergence between the way in which the state organises and categorises space and the way that 'natural' communities of place are located. Communities of place are not the only participants in local digital civic spaces. We might also consider communities of interest or cultural communities as manifest within immigrant or relocated populations. These communities may have different descriptions of geographic place and boundaries that will each be influenced by individual experiences (e.g. inclusion of a particular road in 'your place' may depend on whether you know or recognise any of the people living there). Further, it is possible that social and civic definitions of place also differ within the community. This is not in itself a problem - it can be argued that is in reconciling these differences that a community starts to create a shared narrative of place. For example, events which are attended as a social act, such as a concert or play, can create a shared narrative of place that can provide the foundation for civic action.

The Networked Neighbourhoods Study uses terminology coined by sociologist Lyn Lofland, quoted below by Harris and Flouch, who talks about the distinction between the public and parochial. She defines the 'parochial realm' as

characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities". (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010c, p. 6)

She adds to this a definition of the public realm as being those spaces:

which tend to be inhabited by persons who are strangers to one another or who “know” one another only in terms of occupational or other non personal identity categories (for example, bus driver/customer)’. (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010c, p. 6)

Lofland makes an important distinction here between the places where people know one another as people, and the places where people are known as ‘actors’ rather than individuals. In these terms one of the findings from the research is the ability of these hyperlocal sites to create the more personal relationships Lofland describes within the parochial realm.

One other aspect of place is the interplay between the online and offline public realms and the osmosis that occurs between them. Flouch and Harris, for example, cite many instances of online interactions creating offline events and actions, from clearing snow, to checking on neighbours, to social meet-ups and regular events (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a). They voice a concern that these sites accurately represent the most active, most ‘belonging’ of the residents, and ask whether there are other groups out there with similar levels of participation – just not online. Membership of a community of place in an offline sense can be said to be conferred by residency irrespective of the level of individual participation by the residents, and it is singular in the sense that there is only one place. Online community confers the possibility of multiple narratives and communities overlaying the same geographical area – all separate and with distinct characteristics. While it could be argued that physical communities of place also have this multiplicity there is a finite use of physical public space which means that multiple narratives and

communities might find it difficult to coexist. This is not a new problem and it can be argued that democracy is designed as a process for reconciling these multiple narratives of place into a coherent set of decisions for action. Embedding formal democratic participation within the proposed design provides a potential means to resolve this conflict which is discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.11. Conclusion

Chapters 2 and 3 synthesised the key influences on this thesis, the emergence of the Network Society, the distinct culture of the social web and current thinking and practice with respect to civic participation. It is intended to translate discussion of the Network Society to the scale of hyperlocal participation. Both chapters discuss the evidence base and concerns related to the perceived democratic deficit and the implications this might have for local government in the UK. The proposal made here is that if we accept the emergence of the Network Society then we should consider how to facilitate hyperlocal political and civic participation since it can be argued that our current understanding and process is imperfect at best.

The citizen of the Network Society – the networked citizen - is arguably more informed and, as a result, has more power than her standalone equivalent (Coleman, 2005c). This citizen is able to express herself more directly and to connect to others directly and publicly, with respect to issues and ideas that are important to each of them without the need to go through the hierarchal structure of the representative democratic process. These qualities suggest the need for the government process to be changed in order to accommodate the new role of

networked citizen in decision-making. Castells (2001, p. 48) suggests that reputation and power online involves a constant renegotiation in which “The community accepts the hierarchy of excellence and seniority only as long as this authority is exercised for the well-being of the community as a whole, which means that, often, new tribes emerge and face each other”.

Without an appreciation of the increasingly networked state of the individual and the new cultural aspects of these individuals, it is difficult to make sense of the changing behaviours that we see with respect to civic and political participation.

There are two main themes which we take from this discussion and develop in Chapter 4, which proposes a design for digital civic space. The first is related to the discussion of the ‘publicness’ of the social web where evidence is observable of civic participation online even at the local level on hyperlocal sites. This discussion of public-ness is a core element of the designs both considered and implemented. The second theme is informed by the community engagement literature and provides evidence supporting co-production as way to improve engagement and decision-making. The literature on participatory culture online suggests a more collaborative framing of the relationship between citizen and state, and by the literature on eParticipation whose limitations are highlighted previous approaches. Government has tried to use the Internet to respond to concerns about levels of participation, but these formal approaches which have the design qualities of the current form of government, are not adopted or used in the fluid and agile Network Society. These themes of co-production and collaboration are key features of the proposed design for digital civic space discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: The design of online civic space

Arendt (1958, 198) famously argued that citizenship arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. . . . It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but make their appearance explicitly. (Coleman & Shane, 2011, p. 8721)

Chapter 3 introduced the concept of digital civic space in so far as it can be seen as emerging from geographically bounded digital activity, instigated either by the public (e.g. hyperlocal sites) or by government (e.g. eParticipation platforms). This chapter expands on this and develops the design criteria operationalised in the empirical work presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

These design criteria were developed over the course of the empirical work and reflect the experience of implementing digital civic space concepts. The action research methods approach, as explained further in Chapter 5, involved iterative refinement based on feedback and reflection, and the criteria described here, therefore, in part reflect the evolution of aims and purposes rather than a single hypothesis that was ‘tested’. In developing the design criteria, it was necessary to consider the different forms of participation in civic life, the importance of place in describing civic activity, and the significance of the technology choices in creating digital civic space. These criteria are combined to define the suggested design qualities or affordances of digital civic space and to discuss the role of the civic content creators in this process. The criteria do not stand-alone however. In considering the design of digital civic space I am proposing it’s also necessary to develop:

- a typology that describes the participation within the digital civic space (see section 4.4).
- a description of the type of active citizen who would be found there (see section 4.5)

4.1 Building online spaces

The way in which any space is designed has implications for the behaviours that are enabled by that space (Norman, 2002; Parkinson, 2012). As noted previously, an online space is formed by the content as well as the code (Ellison & Boyd, 2008) that comprise it, and within this space, social participation sets the tone and effect of the environment for participants. To some extent, offline physical spaces share some of these characteristics. Architects may design a town square, for example, but it is the users of that square who define how it is used. Whether it will be a welcoming or a threatening space depends as much on the rules and norms governing the behaviours of the people using it, as on its design (Parkinson, 2012, p. 380). Physical civic space, the public realm of town squares or village greens, is designed or maintained with the intent of serving the community sponsoring it and connecting the people inhabiting it. In the case of a high street, for example, the public realm of pavements, benches and planting is designed to complement the retail experience, but these spaces can be seen also as needing to serve the community with social as well as economic purpose.

Though the intent to control the use of a physical space can affect its design (e.g. the use of specific paints to deter graffiti), it is less writable than in the case of

digital spaces where the content - or representation of user experience and expression - is persistently contained within its fabric. Whether this persistence endows valuable richness or useless detritus is debatable. In addition, with online space, content can be present in different places simultaneously, and can be filtered in order to provide users with a unique experience of the space. Sunstein's (Sunstein, 2009, p. 12) articulation of the 'Daily Me' and Pariser's (Pariser, 2011) 'filter bubble' both describe the online experience of creating a view of the space and content which is personalised to the individual - either knowingly by the individual themselves or by the architect of the environment.

The social signals of offline space, being more established, are better understood than those of online spaces for which the rules are still being written, and where participants have varied levels of experience of reading the social signals that already exist (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath, 1998, 2007; Hogan, 2010). Despite the moniker 'social' web, offline spaces to some extent enforce sociability to a greater extent through physical proximity than online spaces where the user experience can be controlled and managed, but where social signals are less understood or well established. A new user of email will sometimes 'shout' by applying the caps lock, and a new user of Twitter will likely not understand the nuance of the social effect of the weekly convention of 'Follow Friday' or '#FF'.²³

Hyperlocal digital space designers usually seek an audience from a geographically located community, but designers may have different views about how to reach

²³ Follow Friday is a convention used by Twitter users to recommend other users for their followers to follow. It shows respect and appreciation for the people that you '#FF'.

this audience. Thus, digital spaces can respond to the whims, preferences and biases of their creators without recourse to the balance, representativeness and professional skills and experience required by a town planner when designing a public realm. The town planner with years of training, is expected to take account of all the possible users of the space, while the hyperlocal website builder can please him or herself, and respond to the audience that it is hoped to attract. Accessibility criteria provide a good example here. While there is legislation that requires websites to be accessible to those with disabilities, this is rarely if ever enforced outside the public sector. The town planner – and indeed the designer of a government website - needs to adhere to these guidelines. This makes the hyperlocal far more akin to a pub or cafe or even someone's private home than a public village hall or market square although even this analogy breaks down since pubs and cafés are formally licensed environments.

Hyperlocal spaces currently function more like someone's home. The hyperlocal site has the qualities of a private space in the sense that it usually has been created by a private individual, but with a public intent – i.e. intended to be opened up to the public for public civic use. Though the intent of the hyperlocal website creator might be serving the community, the fact that this is framed in his or her own terms limits the openness of the space. If such sites are to offer qualities compatible with a public sphere they must provide the means for anyone to access participation and deliberation. Because of this the public/private space confusion becomes problematic when considering hyperlocal websites. Rather than trying to engineer spaces with inherently private as well as public aspects, one of the criteria proposed for design of digital civic spaces is that they should be created

collectively, and embed design elements to support democratic participation (see section 4.8.1).

This chapter proposes that in order for an online space to be considered to be civic it must have certain qualities and, in order for the space also to have the potential to support democratic deliberation and decision-making, the design needs to encompass certain other qualities. Offline, we separate civic and democratic space - we might talk more informally in the village hall and more formally in the council chamber. Online, there is no need for this distinction - and creating such a distinction could hinder active participation of citizens who are used to contributing in a social and informal way. This does not negate the need to support different 'mode's of interaction. The context collapse described in Chapter 3, means that online spaces need deliberate mechanisms in order to signal 'civic-ness' to participants, make the site accessible for democratic debate, and create an environment that supports civic participation.

Section 3.10 discussed Coleman & Blumler and Sunstein's proposed digital spaces where citizens, politicians and officials can engage in public discourse and political deliberation. The literature on eParticipation also is largely underpinned by the idea that government will create the online spaces for democratic interaction. As discussed in Chapter 3, the evidence in the literature on eParticipation suggests that this does not match the way the public chooses to participate in political discussion and, consequently, there are persistently low levels of participation and little evidence of contribution to government created spaces or participation in decision-making (Chadwick, 2011). Since self-publication is both free and

straightforward - and uncensored - there is little motivation for the public to participate in government spaces which appear to be successful mainly in attracting Coleman's (Coleman, 2006) 'political junkies'.

In addition, if we consider local rather than national government issues that need discussion, we find that they often involve complex interpersonal relationships and granular discussion that are less formal than national political debates. The second case study outlined in Ch. 5, section. 5.9 investigates this content and the differences brought by these conversations happening online which are both public and accessible to a wider audience (see Ch. 6 section 6.3).

The proposed design of digital civic space takes into account the following points;

- 1.informal discussions are an important element of the political conversation (Dahlgren, 2005);
- 2.government has not been seen to be successful in attracting informal civic conversation in its own spaces online, i.e. eParticipation initiatives have failed (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2006b);
- 3.some kind of intervention is needed in order to avoid fragmentation of the public sphere into increasingly homogenous groups that do not interact either with one another or with government (Sunstein, 2009, p. 825).

This chapter proposes a design for a new kind of digital civic space that addresses these points and constitutes the theoretical foundation for the primary research described in later chapters of this thesis.

4.1.1 Code is law?

Both William Mitchell (1995, p. 111) and Lawrence Lessig (2006, pp. 1-8) argue that “code is law” because the code regulates the structures that emerge. James Grimmelmann (Grimmelmann, 2004, p. 1721) argues that Lessig’s use of this phrase is “shorthand for the subtler idea that code does the work of law, but does it in an architectural way”. It is perhaps the absence of law that should be considered with respect to the creation of online space since there is little legislation beyond accessibility laws (for which no effective enforcement or regulation method exists other than self-regulation) dictating the nature of the online experience in the way that planning laws legislate the offline environment. In looking at how code configures digital environments, both Mitchell and Lessig highlight the ways in which digital architectures are structural forces. Boyd expresses this slightly differently:

Networked publics’ affordances do not dictate participants’ behaviour, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement. In essence, the architecture of a particular environment matters and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances. (Boyd, 2010, p. 39)

In designing digital civic space technology choices need to be considered because online spaces are not just the result of the code. The content and relationships carried by this code have a bearing also on the act of creating such spaces (Donath 2007, Boyd 2010). These are social spaces that are created as much by the content as by the code. The choices reflected in the technical design are hugely influential and cannot be ignored since the technology choice affects the experience in a number of different ways. The first of these is with respect to relevance to the

audience. Civic spaces should ‘feel’ relevant to an audience of potentially sophisticated users and this involves appropriate technology choices. For example, if you are streaming video, the ‘relevant’ choice would be to use Flash formats or just embed YouTube clips – just two years earlier the ‘relevant’ choice would have been Windows Media Player. This choice sends a signal to the user of the site, and a contemporary choice provides reassurance to the tech-savvy user. This is a difficult issue to resolve correctly since different audiences may be reassured by different signals or technology choices.

Benkler (Benkler, 2003) suggested the need for a common infrastructure to complement the proprietary one created by the market. Both Benkler and Lessig refer to the ‘commons’ as a place which is free of the market, and discuss these shared spaces as being places of open innovation unfettered by market forces. These commons echo the mediaeval idea of common land and, according to Benkler require a number of conditions:

- “an open physical layer should be built through the introduction of open wireless networks, or a spectrum commons;
- an open logical layer should be facilitated through a systematic policy preference for open rather than closed protocols and standards, and support for free software platforms that no person or firm can unilaterally control;
- an open content layer - not all content must be open, but intellectual property rights have got wildly out of control since the mid 2000s, expanding hugely in scope and force. There is a pressing need to revise

some of the rules that were put in place to defend 20th century business models;

- reform of organisational and institutional structures that resist widely distributed production systems.” (Benkler, 2003, p. 4),

In terms of storage Benkler also proposes a radically open and shared approach to data ownership. With respect to government data this is addressed by the open data movement discussed in the next section.

Below the application layer, the choice of programming language or coding framework can also send signals to the more technically aware audience. Open technical standards allow interoperability and, ultimately, support collaborative behaviour online. By adopting an open, by implication shared, standard the developer is signalling openness to the idea of wider connection and cooperation between his or her work and others. Quite apart from the practical benefits, this is a cultural statement. Taking this further and adopting open source licence models which encourage reuse and further development. Use of open standards provides a powerful – if technically sent – message. The real value of open source and open standards in this context is the design signal they send in creating the online experience.

4.2 Design criteria

The fieldwork for this thesis, introduced in the next chapter, was concerned with ways in which local government could build digital civic space that would embrace

the range of activities described in section 4.3 while also exploring the digital civic spaces citizens are creating for themselves. These design criteria emerged from this work as a set of observations of the way in which the public is creating civic space, in conjunction with analysis of the gap between these spaces and the nature of a space that would facilitate democratic outcomes. These criteria are presented here as a contribution to theory, but also as concepts operationalised in the fieldwork for this thesis. These criteria are based on a combination of practical experience of working with local government and a synthesis of the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. They are intended to connect the informal civic activity that is already evident, with local and hyperlocal websites so as to create opportunities for informal and formal democratic activity. These qualities have been refined and formalised as follows:

1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen.
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-productive relationship between citizen and government.
3	Adopt a self-defined geography or topic	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the civic creators. Similarly, the topic should be defined by participants and not imposed by outside forces.
4	Open and information rich	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and transparency. This means, e.g. that no information should be available in the space that is not available to all participants.
5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.

Table 4.1

Design

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and to connect digital civic space to a specific geographical location. The criteria also create the context for democratic interaction based on the principles of open government with the aim of building trust between citizens and their representatives. The last two criteria suggest how citizen interaction might be connected to the formal democratic process.

4.3 Discussion of the design criteria

This new space would operate as a “networked public” (Ellison & Boyd, 2008) and aggregate public content from a variety of locations into a single space with the

stated aim of creating a shared environment for local civic issues. Boyd describes networked publics as follows:

Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Networked publics serve many of the same functions as other types of publics – they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family. While networked publics share much in common with other types of publics, the ways in which technology structures them introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments. The properties of bits – as distinct from atoms – introduce new possibilities for interaction. As a result, new dynamics emerge that shape participation. (Boyd, 2010, p. 1)

The literature on online communities and community engagement suggests that social relationships are crucial to their functioning and, therefore, a digital civic space should be one where identity is significant and where people interact as citizens and not as unconnected or anonymous individuals. The need to support citizen expectations about the nature of interactions with elected representatives (Coleman, 2005a, 2005c) suggests that online civic space should afford co-productive interaction opportunities that allow all participants to speak on equal terms though where necessary there should be some acknowledgement of different roles and responsibilities.

Participation within the space could range from having access and contact with the elected representative to active participation in true co-production of outcomes. Based on these design criteria, the space would support the full range of democratic engagement from informal/formal to civic/political. It is reasonable to

expect that social as well as civic interactions should be supported in this space because social capital is one of the underpinnings of democratic culture and needs to be both supported and expressed (Norris, 2011; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Putnam, 2000).

The digital civic space suggested here aggregates content from significant sites that meet the criteria described above and are examined in succeeding chapters. This aggregation creates a new destination that can be said to reflect a more complete picture of the local civic debate than disconnected, individual sites are able to do, without imposing control or undue influence on the actions of individuals. This space would not necessarily be a content holder or ultimate destination, but instead would connect the ‘network of networks’ that makes up the community, and give to it a single persistent digital location that reflects its digital footprint in as complete a sense as possible.

4.3.1 Public

In addition to adopting Boyd’s sense of online space as a ‘networked public’ (Boyd, 2010), and the design affordances she outlines, digital civic space could be considered a ‘public’ space that is freely accessible to all. Parkinson, in the following quote, proposes four different senses in which a physical space might be considered to be public and which are relevant to online space: “So, to sum up, physical space can be ‘public’ in four major ways. It is space that 1. Is openly accessible; and/or 2. uses common resources; and/or 3. has common effects; and/or 4. is used for the performance of public roles.” (Parkinson, 2012, p. 856)

Parkinson also discusses the need for a recognised location in a city for democratic activity, and the civic space proposed here would fulfil a similar role in the online sphere. Its primary purpose would be to support improved participation in democratic discussion and decision-making.

Being able to see the discussion, refer to what has gone before, and understand the final decision, allow a better democratic experience than the current process where much of the deliberation is hidden from the public (Coleman & Price, 2011).

It can be argued that there is a need for more discrete spaces for negotiation - what Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 786) refers to as 'enclave spaces'. In terms of design, this needs to be balanced with the current lack of trust in the political process.

There is also evidence that openness might improve the quality of the discussion:

Openness Group decision-making projects generally indicate that online discussions, relative to face-to-face group meetings, generate more open exchanges of ideas (Rains 2005), suggesting considerable utility for deliberative work. Task-oriented groups generate more unique ideas working in computer-mediated settings than when meeting face to face (Gallupe, DeSantis, and Dickson 1988; Dennis 1996).[\(Price in Connecting Communities 2011\)](#)

In creating digital space user are often using technologies that they do not understand and, as a result, risk ascribing qualities of openness to the Internet which are overstated (Morozov, 2011). True openness depends on strong privacy, for example, the ability to decide which elements of one's personal data are public vs private, and on net neutrality; these issues are not being directly addressed by the mainstream media or politics perhaps because it is considered that many lack the technical knowledge to understand the debate. With respect to the proposed

design, one of the expressed design intents is to support openness and publicity, and this was discussed in an earlier section.

Finally, there is also a sense in which these spaces should be ‘consciously public’ in order to support the original description of intent exemplified by “I want to talk to my community”. Participation within the digital civic space would be a conscious act and not just one of passive content aggregation. There are a number of reasons for this. First, to ensure that participants are aware of the potential audience for their remarks, second, so that the public character of the space becomes a matter of conscious participation as opposed to surveillance by the state; third, to meet the Habermasian suggestion that participation in the public sphere should be active – i.e. with intent even as a spectator - not passive. Therefore, it is not enough to aggregate content from hyperlocal and other ‘informal civic’ spaces - participants should also have the option to actively decide to participate in wider civic discourse.

In practical terms the public criteria requires a space that ‘feels’ public to participants, as well as one that is technically or operationally public and free for any citizen to participate within. The results (see Ch. 6) show that the design criteria evolved during the fieldwork, and as the initial definition of public space was biased towards an environment created by local government rather than one shaped directly by participants. Informal conversations with the civic creators involved in the Virtual Town Hall project were clearly of the view that it was not ‘their’ space. The third experiment tested the use of this criteria more effectively by both actively seeking out and providing a platform for constructive opinions

which differed from those of the project sponsor, in order to demonstrate the commitment to public space, and demonstrating these behaviours in face-to-face events where open space techniques were employed to ensure that participants could influence the agenda (see Ch. 5 section 5.10).

4.3.2 Co productive

Content management on sites where users generate much of the content raises practical issues as well as design intent issues. The practical issues of how to manage the content is mainly tackled by finding ways for it to be appropriately displayed to other users. The way in which this search for solutions is conducted and who has responsibility and power in this process depends on the website's design intent. Traditionally, responsibility is assumed by a 'moderator' (or earlier a systems operator or sysops) who exercises some measure of consensual authority. The authority is endowed by assent to this participation, but can involve frictions and defections for those unhappy with the arrangement. The technology and the culture of the use of social technologies has evolved and the 'gatekeeper' type activity of sysops/moderators has been overtaken by a more emergent and self-organising process of social governance where content is curated rather than moderated. Though most discussion spaces have some kind of moderation in place, this tends to be passive - 'post-moderating' rather than checking content in advance.

The ability to control content and/or access rights gives the participant significant power over other users and this is significant for design criterion 2 –co-productive

space. Content curation, where content is highlighted, but not controlled, is included in this criterion in place of moderation of content, for reasons that will be explained later in this section.

Moderation is the process by which the user examines content generated by the site owner for compliance with agreed rules or codes of conduct, either before or after posting to a social networking site. Moderation controls the content allowed on the site and, as such, confers a great deal of power on the moderator. The role does not have to reside in one person or organisation, and more collaborative forms of moderation exist to allow sharing of the burden of the moderation process and to create a more collaborative user experience. For example, the Slashdot site uses a peer moderation system where selected users²⁴ are able to award points to stories. The Digg site²⁵ operates according to a similar principle; whereby users flag stories that they like and this increases the ranking of these stories. Many discussion boards rely on users to flag content as inappropriate (this is referred to as 'passive' moderation and can save on administrative costs, reduce legal risks and encourage community participation). The popular Mumsnet forum, which is the current pre-eminent parenting online community in the UK, is

²⁴ The Slashdot moderation system was created to reduce the burden of moderation on site owners and helps to highlight good quality content. Users who meet certain criteria are selected as moderators and can award points to stories that they think should be highlighted. While the site owners retain ultimate control over the process of choosing moderators and the rules governing site moderation, it is a highly collaborative moderation process. It is explained in full at: <http://slashdot.org/moderation.shtml> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

²⁵ Digg is a peer reviewed news site where content is ranked based on user approval. More information is available at: <http://digg.com/faq> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

moderated passively and relies on members' self-policing and reporting breaches of 'netiquette²⁶' to the community team which can remove content and privileges from members.

Although these moderation approaches aim to be inclusive, their use means that there is still an ultimate authority that can control user content, and the presence of this authority is difficult to reconcile with the co-productive environment. As described in Chapter 5, the first project examined this issue of moderation and, as a result, subsequent projects adopted content curation instead. However, for even these very passive and collaborative forms of moderation to be accepted by the audience subject to them, these individuals need to trust those with moderation/curation power and be satisfied that their judgements will be fair. In the context of democratic debate, a negative view of moderation will see it as a form of censorship. The lack of trust between UK politicians and UK citizens has been discussed in earlier chapters, and in suggesting a design for digital civic space that might address the issue of democratic deficit, the area of content control is one where design elements could have a positive effect.

The term curation has been adopted by the social media practitioner community to describe the process of managing user generated content in line with a specific

²⁶ Mumsnet refers to its code of conduct as 'netiquette'

(<http://www.mumsnet.com/info/netiquette>)(Retrieved 09.02.13). It has a separate set of guidelines addressing the issue of 'Trolling' - posting from a (usually) fake address in order to incite an argument or upset the tenor of the discussion; (<http://www.mumsnet.com/info/trolls>) (Retrieved 09.02.13).

goal or objective (Kanter, 2011). It is used here to provide a means of selecting significant content on an on-going basis and provide a balanced view of debate and discussion within digital civic space. Content curation is not a new web activity and there are several early examples of user organised spaces in the realm of open source projects, including Wikipedia, which have clear rules and protocols for the creation and management of content (Mateos-Garcia & Steinmuller, 2006).

Curation describes a process where user generated content is shaped and presented in such a way as to reflect to the purpose of the content curator. This can be seen in mainstream news services where user generated content is encouraged and then chosen and highlighted as part of the editorial process. Boyd (Ellison & Boyd, 2008) describes the “amplification effect” of presentation changes where change in how content is displayed can communicate additional meaning or emphasis to that originally intended by the author; this is a central effect of content curation. At the time of writing, in the technology world, there was significant ‘buzz’ about social search (with recommendations made based on content consumed by the user’s social network) and the curated web (where services such as Pinterest enable users to consciously create showcases of preferred content). As was the case with previous “technology bubbles” this excitement may be over before this thesis is submitted, or semantic search engines, such as Google, may find a way to counter it. Search and the methods for choosing what content is interacted with, are central to the digital experience.

At the hyperlocal level, there is a ‘search gap’ with mainstream tools such as Google not providing the means to prioritise ‘local’ or ‘civic’ content. Google is

optimised in order to deliver advertising revenue and, as a result, is most likely to prioritise commercial sites over informal civic content. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 in the context of the second project and the empirical work looks specifically at this issue of finding hyperlocal content. The inclusion of curation in the list of qualities needed for digital civic space is partly to address this search gap by creating an active process for finding and managing content and making on-going decisions with respect to significance. Once this search gap is addressed, as Chapter 5 shows, it is likely that hundreds of significant sites will be identified. In one county, and one topic area, the search process described in Chapter 4 yielded over 200 sites in which relevant content was being created and shared.

The inclusion of co-production as an affordance of digital civic space is driven by two things; that collaborative behaviour is a property of a more participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2008) and that it seems reasonable to start a process of reengaging citizens in the democratic process with those people who are demonstrably engaged with the civic society. This inclusion does not ignore the distinct tension between co-production and representative democracy, which would need to be resolved for both qualities to be present in the digital civic space, discussed by Bovaird (Bovaird, 2007) in terms of the difficulty of politicians passing power to citizens. One of the effects of a more open and transparent environment - and one that also is digitally mediated which results in many ambiguities being unsustainable - is that the tensions between the community engagement field which, as discussed in Chapter three, is increasingly emphasising co-productive approaches, and the current processes of democratic

decision-making. The co-productive behaviours of the social web put pressure on the formal decision-making process and, if the use of these technologies continues to grow, then these pressures will need to be addressed at some point.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how we can find significant sites. and offers a replicable methodology for doing so. The question of who should carry out this curation and what might be appropriate in terms of balance, is left open in relation to design, but is discussed in Chapter 7.

The co-production criteria was introduced after the first experiment as a result of better understanding the nature of the participation and role of civic creators in digital civic space. Participants and space can be seen as inextricably linked and, while there are also compelling theoretical reasons why a co-productive space is necessary to increase citizen participation in civic and democratic activities (Bovaird, 2005; M. Harris & Boyle, 2009), there is also a practical consideration of needing to create a space sympathetic to the way that civic creators behave with the wider social web (Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold & Weeks, 2012).

4.3.3 Adopting a self-defined geography

Chapter 3 section 3.10.2 addressed the question of place in some detail, and argued the need for the inclusion of place-based criteria. An additional nuance to this argument is the suggested need for place be self-defined by the community that is 'claiming the space'. This is partly to assert participants' power within the space through the description of place and resultant issues being defined by

citizens and not by the state. It is also in order to build on 'bottom up' participation of active citizens who, as argued earlier, are creating their own civic spaces.

However the definition of place can be a contested issue, with different groups and networks claiming ownership on the basis of different narratives. For example, a village in an area such as the west country, might include divergent groups of part-time and full-time residents with very different views of place. The same might apply to the context of different ethnic groups living close together. There is further potential for tension between full time and 'expatriate' residents who return to see family or friends. This need to reconcile parallel or conflicting narratives is one of aspects of digital civic space suggested which may require active intervention rather being something which might be delivered by citizen created spaces.

The extent to which it is possible to create a shared narrative and therefore definition of place is a complex issue and there is no obvious standard or 'neat' solution. What is proposed is that place is something participants should define for themselves, in both the social and civic context, and reconcile with the formal democratic places to which it might relate, which in their turn are complex at government and local levels. This complexity is illustrated by the following (partial) list of currently used geographical place descriptors:

- GPS point data generally – anything that has longitude/latitude;
- ward – smallest electoral unit;
- lower supra-output areas and output areas – defined by the Office for National Statistics;

- logical operational boundaries –definitions that make sense for specific service delivery tasks such as waste collection routes;
- postcode –where the postal service thinks you live;
- property gazette/Land Registry –where your house is located.

These descriptions provide some of the reference points that describe place, but there is little cross over with how a member of the public might describe his or her community and location. For the purposes of this work, we adopt a community driven view of location rather than the state view. Local government takes a different stance and considers the criteria of “work, live, study’ in considering community, and uses this as a working definition for whom to consider with respect to consultation and engagement.

The criteria of self-defined place was applied to all three experiments and reflect learning from the Citizenscape project (Howe, 2010).

4.3.4 Open and information rich

Open government is the subject of much discussion in the UK public sector at both national and local levels. It echoes the changes instigated by Barack Obama in 2009 when, soon after he came to power, he took executive action to create a federal data store and open government initiative.²⁷ The 2010 coalition government in the UK set up a data store²⁸ and has mandated local government to release spending

²⁷ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/about> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

²⁸ <http://www.data.gov.uk> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

data on every transaction of over £500; in 2012 the UK Open Data Initiative was further expanded with the creation of an Open Data Institute²⁹ with an initial endowment from the Technology Strategy Board³⁰ of £10M over five years. Government has released crime data in an API³¹ which allows members of the public to not only view the data but also to interact with it and use it as the basis for new applications and services. This policy has several motivations: a desire to increase trust and demonstrate transparency, an ideological need to reduce bureaucracy and support the idea of the public picking up the job of government audit, and the hope that programmers and thinkers in the open data movement will use these new data to create applications and services that are useful to government and citizens alike. This appeals directly to the hacker culture³² that is at the heart of the Network Society culture and allows participants to work quickly and co-productively. The London Data Store is at the cutting edge of these developments. It describes itself thus:

The London Datastore has been created by the Greater London Authority (GLA) as a first step towards freeing London's data. We want everyone to be able access the data that the GLA and other public sector organisations hold, and to use that data however they see fit – for free. The GLA is committed to using its connections and influence to request and cajole other public sector organisations into releasing their data here too, and it's an objective backed strongly by Boris Johnson, Mayor of London.

²⁹ <http://theodi.org> (Retrieved 16.02.13)

³⁰ <https://www.innovateuk.org> (Retrieved 16.04.14)

³¹ API - Application Programming Interface allowing external developers to interact with systems.

³² Hacker culture refers to groups of coders who develop and change code ('hack') belonging to other people. Hacker culture is identified by Castells as one of the cultural antecedents to the Network Society and reflects a meritocratic and participative group of highly skilled actors.

Releasing data though is just half the battle. Raw data often doesn't tell you anything until it has been presented in a meaningful way and most people do not have the tools to do this. That's why we joined up with 4iP who have created a Developers' Fund to encourage the masses of technical talent that we have in London to transform rows of text and numbers into Facebook apps, websites or mobile products which people can actually find useful.

(<http://data.london.gov.uk/datastore/about>)(Retrieved 16.02.13)

Open data have the potential to radically shift power between state and citizen and to allow the public to build and manage its own services based on government information. This shift relies on data literacy and policy expertise to use the information acquired. This skills gap could open a further divide in democratic participation. Open data also have the potential to promote a witch-hunt, with local newspapers becoming obsessed with Town Hall biscuit purchases and other trivia. Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009, p. 1660) points to the tension between freedom and openness for the individual, and freedom for the organisation or corporation or indeed the community, and that this becomes acute at a local level where data released at the postcode level of granularity can identify individuals in the community. There is also concern that being open and being accessible are not the same things - data can be released, but without context and analysis are not accessible as an aid to decision-making.

There is also potential for open data to have less positive consequences; for example, when the Home Office created a crime map which plotted crimes geographically at street level, there was concern that this would increase fear of crime because people were receiving an incomplete picture based on one set of data.

There is active discussion around the need for more open government and open data, evidenced by the Open Government movement (Nash & Dutton, 2011) and accompanying open data efforts (O'Hara, 2012). There is upward pressure from movements such as Wikileaks and the more local Openly Local website. In parallel, data led journalism is increasing highlighting concern that data and information are different things and that the general public may lack the skills needed to process or make sense of open data and connect it into decision-making. The social web and Network Society are defined by the flow of information through networks and so, for democratic decision-making to be part of this sphere, the relevant information needs to be in place. The impacts and outcomes of making data freely available are not understood, and the skills that the public will need in order to interpret and use this new resource are also not clear. Access to information is a core element of effective democratic debate and, as such, should have a place within digital civic space.

The open criteria, developed over the course of the three experiments, was not operationalised until the third one, since its importance with respect to building trust between the different stakeholders was previously not noted. In the third study in the fieldwork (see Ch 6, section 6.4) the project team released a research report rather than the public committee documents that informed its decision. The project team would have liked also to have released the raw data, but this was not possible for several reasons.

Of the design criteria identified for digital civic space, the criterion of openness is perhaps most profoundly likely to change the relationships between the different actors in the community engagement process, since it removes or at least reduces

the space for negotiation and discretion which often appears to be a central element in community engagement. What happens if all participants have access to the same information? Noveck (Noveck, 2003) and others (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2006) have argued that Open Government will be an essential quality of 21st century democracy; if this were the case it could affect every aspect of the relationship between citizen and state, including relationships currently mediated via community engagement as opposed to direct political participation in decision-making. Morozov (Morozov 2011) is more skeptical about the centrality of openness in the democratic relationship, and points out that the potentially destabilizing effect of openness within the context of a more digital democratic conversation.

The criterion of openness was the least tested of the described design criteria although the CRIF project (Ch 6, Section. 6.4.9) demonstrated the significance of creating a shared evidence base as a basis for meaningful debate. This suggests the importance of trusted information being part of the democratic decision-making process and relates also to the emergent prominence of open data in government practice in the UK.

There is no imperative for digital civic space created by citizens to include the qualities of publicity, identity or co-production, and there is little evidence that they will make information a central component of these sites. There is no reason why these sites should encompass these qualities since they are under the purview of the individual site creators and use tools designed without the explicit purpose

of supporting democratic engagement. This is another area where the informal digital civic spaces identified in the second fieldwork study (see Ch 6, Section 6.3.8) two do not demonstrate some of the affordances articulated for the aggregate digital civic space described in this chapter.

4.3.5 Known identities

In order to meet the condition of democracy that the opinions with citizens should be considered, the proposed design requires that participants demonstrate that they are citizens with the rights and responsibilities attached to this designation. Chapter 2 section 2.5.1 discussed the nature of online identity and identified some of the tensions that exist between informal civic websites where many participants are not identified, and participation in a formal process which does require some form of identification. Social signalling online can address this question of identity with some though not complete certainty (Donath, 1998), which is sufficient for most online communities to function, with strong social ties (Rheingold, 1993). The difficulty is that this informal basis of identification does not meet the conditions of information for formal decision-making by local government in the UK, which require that the representativeness of the contributing group be understood in terms of demographics and specific interests in particular issue.

The question of anonymous vs identified content creation online is a vexed one for website managers. User testing of any website usually demonstrates that the lower transaction cost (i.e. fewer 'clicks' required to achieve the objective) of anonymous transactions results in greater volumes of participation accompanied by a decrease in the quality of the information and content created. In a democratic context, an

additional tension arises because some element of identification is needed in order to be able to measure how representative the sampled opinion or debate is undertake a democratic process.

This tension is not just a problem for website managers or bureaucrats, participants also need to reconcile their digital identities and views on private vs public content. Participating in a civic context can raise individual concerns that do not apply to purely social online interactions. There is also concern about one's views being made public to the state, which, while arguably benign in the context of local government in the UK, can cause some participants anxiety.

In this context identity refers to the ability to 'know' who is interacting online. Identity is a point of contention between the two definitions. Where the proposed digital civic space described in this chapter would rely on known identities in order to make the necessary link to current decision-making processes, the less formal digital civic spaces that overlap within a community have less requirement for a unique and auditable capability to identify the participants in their spaces. It might be that it is this lack of stricture that allows these sites to flourish since people can move seamlessly between their informal social and civic interactions. It is in this area that new technologies and the Network Society behaviours are most at odds with previous practice with respect to eDemocracy, for example, where most online platforms would ensure that administrators know who are the participants. Discussions with local government officers as part of the Virtual Town Hall experiment highlighted the fact that this is a point of tension in how to connect informal civic and formal democratic participation.

In design terms, there is also a pull towards pragmatism with respect to working with the way that people already choose to identify themselves and interact with systems such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. While there are serious issues related to using commercial platforms to manage civic or democratic authentication, the popularity of these platforms cannot be ignored and must be considered as part of the balance between adequate identity management and adequate levels of participation.

A central question is how do you demonstrate incontrovertibly that you are a citizen without encountering the barriers to use involved in lengthy site registration processes. A possible solution is proposed here:

- an ID management system which either authenticates against the local electoral role or requires the user to provide basic demographic data;
- ability to authenticate social media content against this ID so that you can attribute, for example, Facebook content to your democratic ID, or vice versa.

This is at best an imperfect and pragmatic solution, but it does reflect learning from the eParticipation field, which indicates that extensive engineering of solutions will not deliver audience (Chadwick, 2011; Lowndes et al., 2006b).

The use of the identity criteria evolved between the first and third experiments. The first study used a simple hosted authentication method; the final one enabled people to use their social media credentials. This shift reflects not only learning

from this research but also evolving best practices with respect to how identity is authenticated across different social networking sites. The ability to gather identity information within three experiments was limited; although identity was a crucial criterion in respect of the discussions with local government officers and elected representatives it was not something that the civic creators particularly valued or indeed wanted to offer to the local authorities in question. I return to this in more detail in Chapter 7 which discusses possibility for further research.

4.4 Participation within digital civic spaces

As discussed, online space can be described as being comprised of both code and content. This section proposes a categorisation for different types of activity within digital civic space, which describes the content. The inclusion of all of these forms of activity in digital civic space design is indicative of the way in which networked publics function, and addresses the tension between the context collapse (discussed in earlier chapters) and the more rigid demands of eParticipation platforms. This typology was applied in the fieldwork in order to identify websites and content creators that might legitimately be said to form part of the public sphere discussed in Chapter two.

The digital civic space includes interactions between individuals, as well as content contributions which might be intended for a particular group or audience. There are three main types of activities included here: social, civic and democratic. The definitions of these terms are described below:

Social	Interactions or contributions between friends or family
Civic	Interactions or contributions with the wider community, with people with whom there is a common interest but not necessarily a personal relationship
Democratic	Interactions or contributions connected to democratic participation

Table 4.2: Definition of social, civic and democratic terms

Social activity

Goffman (Goffman, 1959) outlines the nature of different types of social interactions and the acceptability of different social signals and notes that these depend on context. Social interactions take place with anyone we consider to be a friend or family member, and only affects other people in the same social group – these interactions have no external implications. Dunbar (Dunbar, 2010, p. 254) describes them as “anyone who you might want to say hello to if you bumped into them at 3am at Hong Kong airport”. This is a wide definition, but it can also be expressed as defining social interactions as being those contacts with people you are happy to see in many contexts – people with whom your relationship transcends shared interests or purposes and with whom you feel a personal connection.

Civic activity

Civic activities can be defined as interactions that are open to others outside the actor’s social circle. Dahlgren (Dahlgren location 1023) refers to “free association for a common purpose outside both the market and the private sphere of the home”. The transition from social to civic includes acknowledgement of the necessity to interact with this different set of people and the need to behave differently as a result. The distinction between social and civic refers back to

Habermas's distinction between the private and public spheres and the requirement he sets of deliberate participation in the public sphere – a conscious decision to interact with those outside your family setting. Civic actions may be defined in terms of intent, e.g. they manifest a shared intention to improve the community, but can also be defined in terms of membership or activity such as community organising. A major topic in this thesis research is this civic category, where it is important to define and measure specific actions with the aim of examining the potentials for further transition from civic to democratic behaviour.

Democratic activity

Democratic interactions, on one level, are defined by the presence of a legal body and framework within which the interaction must take place. In addition, society has applied rules for the process, with which participants need to comply in order to reach a final outcome that will stand up to a legal challenge, i.e. that is formally legitimate. Democratic interactions are distinct from civic ones in that there is no legal obligation for elected representatives to take account of opinions from the digital civic space (though there will be other pressures) in democratic processes; legal redress is available in cases where the process does not follow the rules.

4.4.1 The distinction between informal and formal

These three types of activities are further defined by making a distinction between formal and informal behaviours. The purpose here is to ascribe intent to content, and content creators, which allow the drawing some conclusions about how government might relate to these hyperlocal websites. Intention is often understood as a desire to be part of the media landscape, and much of the

discussion on hyperlocal websites focuses on their effect on local media (Radcliffe, 2012) or as a specific act of political communication (Coleman, 2005c). Intent in terms of the audience that is being addressed, can be inferred with some certainty from the content created. The categorisation proposed here is based on the intended audience of the content being described.

This use of formal/informal behaviours draws on the literature on social capital, which describes formal social capital as involving membership of associations, and informal social capital as belonging to less structured groups and organisations (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Wallace & Pichler, 2007). The next section explores this distinction in more detail.

Informal participation

In the categorisation presented in Table 4.3 (p.179), informal participation does not require the participant to 'join' anything. The connections between individuals in this case are a matter of personal choice and are social in that they are based on trust and compatibility. Online, this might be signalled by the exchange of personal information or information that implies a common 'real life' experience. There is no other requirement to identify oneself or to be accountable for opinions or ideas in informal participation, although there is a strong correlation between trust and disclosure of identity (Donath, 2007).

In the context of democratic participation, an additional meaning for the term 'informal' could be proposed – that these interactions are not acknowledged to be

part of the decision-making process. These comments might be open and accessible on the social web, and they might be 'public' in the sense that Habermas talks of 'the public', but there is no mechanism for the elected representatives to take note of these thoughts and opinions, and no acknowledged route for them to be considered as part of the evidence base for any decision. They do not have the legitimacy of the media though, increasingly, they are treated in a similar way as online campaigns, and actions are reported by the mainstream media and responded to by politicians (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a).

Formal participation

Formal interactions in this categorisation require the individual to join an organisation or make their identity known and to frame their remarks within the context of an acknowledged decision-making process. These interactions are subject to audit in some way, and the participants can be held to account legally as a result. Formal consultation is an example of this since it can be subject to judicial review,³³ and elected representatives have legally defined decision-making powers.³⁴ Formal decision-making processes typically exist in order to manage

³³ Government consultations can be called in for judicial review by the Administrative Court as is explained in the House of Parliament paper at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp2006/rp06-044.pdf> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

³⁴ These powers were amended and expanded in the 2011 Local Government Act to include a General Power of Competence and increased the decision-making powers of councils. This 'plain English' guide explains the Act in more detail:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishguide> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

situations where consensus may not exist, and where competing interests need to be managed. They are often structural in nature, i.e. certain types of decisions must be taken via formal methods, and part of the reason for this is political or democratic accountability. Participation in a formal role shows acceptance of the need to influence and interact with someone/thing outside of one's direct sphere of influence – which may not be necessary as part of the informal stage. In a representative democratic context, formality refers also to the fact that the individual is not able to take a decision directly, but may only be seeking to influence the actions of actual decision makers.

4.4.2 Typology of social, civic and democratic participation

Based on the three types of activity and the distinction between formal and informal participation I propose a typology of participation within digital civic space which is captured in table 4.3:

Stage	Intent (for illustrative purposes)	Example
Informal Social	I use social media in order to socialise with my friends and family – I just want to keep in touch with people	Personal Facebook page
Informal Civic	I use social media in order to connect to my local community and talk about issues which I think are important to us	Community website or hyperlocal blog
Formal Civic	I use social media to make sure that the views of my community are considered by decision	ePetition

	makers and are part of the final decision. I want to influence things	
Formal Democratic	I want to be part of setting the agenda for my community – I want to change things	Voting

Table 4.3: Informal and Formal Participation

This framework was developed in order to illustrate the range of interactions that fall within the scope of digital civic space as described in this chapter. It is important to note that there is no quality or value judgement put on these categories – for example, illegal or violent protests could be considered to be informal civic action.

The boundaries between these categories are porous, for example, an ePetition might start as a civic action, but then be advanced through a council decision-making process to become formal and democratic. Individual participation is also porous, with individuals potentially acting in each of these types at any time. For example, formal representatives (e.g. local councillors) can be involved in their official capacity at any stage of the process beyond the informal social, and can play the roles of community advocates or campaigners within the informal civic category; the degree to which it is necessary for them to be involved increases as we move towards formal democratic decision-making.

4.4.3 Development and implementation of the typology over the course of the research

This typology was developed as part of the work on the first case (see Ch. 5 section 5.8) and remained consistent throughout the subsequent cases. However, there were some practical difficulties involved in translating it into operational use. While intent is a useful way of illustrating these different categorisations, there are some practical limitations with respect to the use of intent to categorise content, which were revealed during the experimental phase of this work and which make it unworkable as a way of identifying relevant content. It was clear during the development of the social media audits (see Ch. 5 section 5.10) that intent is not reliably 'searchable' - it can only be used to categorise content retrospectively. There is also a question about whether this intent is or can be known- for example, someone may wish to be part of the agenda setting process for their communities, but unless they can be observed as being engaged with the agenda setting process their content should be categorised as informal civic participation. There is also a question about whether content creators are consciously creating civic content; the idea of an informal civic content being a 'positive by-product' with respect to another interest or agenda for the creator is discussed in Chapter 6.

Nonetheless, some evidence of intent was gathered as a result of the interactions with civic creators (described in Ch. 6 section 6.5.5) and this helped to inform the digital civic space design criteria. Content creators can be considered to be serving other and perhaps multiple motivations when they create their content; this is discussed in more length in Chapter 5 which describes the process used to categorise the field data. Intent is important if one wants to build on the fact of

content creation in order to address issues of democratic participation; this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. However, it is less important than an appreciation that digital civic space includes a range of activities spanning each of these types. This blending of activity is a critical difference between eParticipation sites and the proposed digital civic space.

4.5 Civic creators

Technical design criteria are central to the creation of digital civic space and the content creators who write this space into being are essential to its nature. While not discounting the importance of audience or maintenance roles within virtual communities, it is important to acknowledge that hyperlocal content creators – or civic creators - are central to digital civic space. The empirical work for this thesis, which examined over 1,000 hyperlocal sites, indicates the variety of motivations and interests of these civic creators rather than any homogeneity of purpose. This finding, and the inclusion of civic creators as central to digital civic space design emerged after an unsuccessful attempt to create a predefined role of ‘community ambassador’ in the Virtual Town Hall project. The outcome of this is discussed in detail in Chapter 6 section 6.2.6 and expanded with evidence gathered as part of the social media audit work which showed that where this activity was successful it was a grassroots activity (see interview results in Ch. 6 section 6.3). This was confirmed by the fact that creation of hyperlocal sites has been attempted unsuccessfully by mainstream media. *The Guardian* newspaper conducted a high

profile local news network project,³⁵ and the NorthCliffe Media group, with little success at the time of writing, had tried to create hyperlocal sites under the 'LocalPeople' brand (Thurman et al., 2011). Those hyperlocal sites that survive and are recognised seem to be dependent on active individuals dedicating substantial amounts of time to this effort. Rather than being simply an attempt to create highly localised news provision, hyperlocal websites need to reflect the interests of all the citizens in the area. Several claims have been made about the motivations of civic creators:

Perhaps the most common reason for creating hyperlocal services is to address specific gaps in local news or information provision. Some of these gaps are the results of cuts in newspapers or other forms of traditional media, but in other cases, hyperlocal outlets are covering areas that have always been too small for commercial media provision. (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 17)

This contrasts with the experience of this research, described in Chapter 6 section 6.3.5, where desire to produce local news was not a dominant motivation or intent. Some saw it as a means to end - they wanted to see something happening in their community and this is the most expedient way to achieve it. Others saw the site as being a way of 'giving back'. Many of these people want to be more involved in their community and see the role of civic creator as a way of achieving it. A few want to actively engage with the democratic process. What is clear is that there is no homogenous set of motivations. In the case of the active civic content creators encountered in this research and in my work more generally, there are multiple motivations and intentions related to the creation of sites.

³⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sustainability/sustainability-report-2011-local> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

The fieldwork for this thesis provided evidence about the need to consider the centrality of these civic creators with respect to digital civic space, and an essential element of the proposed design is that it does not require these individuals, who are vital elements of the infrastructure, to amend their behaviour or to adopt an intent or purpose different from those animating their participation.

The definition of civic creator is deliberately broad and refers to the intended audience rather than any specific qualities of the creator or the content created. The criteria discussed in this chapter take account of these multiple motivations rather than making a premature attempt to describe them as established and ‘normalised’ behaviour.

In attempting to identify civic creators the following qualities were seen as indicating a likelihood that the content was created by a civic creator.

Quality	Description
Identity or provenance	Sites that have a recognisable author or curator. This can be indicated by regular ‘admin’ postings on a blog or by responses and comments. It could also be indicated by regular updates of an event calendar - we are trying to differentiate between ‘link farms’ and advertising sites and genuinely locally curated content. It does not always mean that this person is publicly known or contactable but there should be a sense of a person (or persons) curating the site.

Persistence	Sites and individuals that are active over a reasonable period of time – or are linked to a specific campaign – not 2 post blogs that have been set up with the best intentions.
Responsiveness	Indications that the creator is aware of an audience and wants to interact with it. This can be shown through responses and comments on the site or by the tone of the text. Often one person may be creating the content, but clearly in response to wider conversations within the community.
Constructiveness	Voices that want to improve their community not just complain. This is the most difficult quality to manage and we will tend to include a wide range on content on this continuum but exclude anything that would not be acceptable to a standard code of conduct on a SNS.

Table 4.4: Significance Criteria

These qualities were identified following evaluation of the first project (described in chapter 6) and were tested in each of the social media audit projects (Chapter 6 section 6.3). This part of the research was initially developed to respond to some of the concerns of the officers and elected representatives by asking ‘who should we listen to online?’, but emerged as a central element of the social media audit work. In the main, these qualities are closely aligned with the design criteria introduced in the previous section. For example, if the one of the criteria for digital civic space is to know the identity of the participants then it follows that we should be able to identify who the civic creators are in real life.

The quality of persistence is related to the need to distinguish between civic creators and individuals who might express their outrage or dissatisfaction online, but do not have the commitment to convert it into a 'proper' campaign. It is included in order to encourage these civic spaces to be constructive arenas in which there is real debate as opposed to position based posturing.

Constructiveness is highly a subjective criterion and underlines the practical purpose behind the audits described in the second project which was to find a subsection of local citizens who would be interested in working with the client (usually the local authority). It's inclusion is an attempt to include some measure of effect beyond the "I use social media to talk to my community" and to extend this into the active intent where possible of "I want to change my community for the better" in order to support the affordance of co-production within the digital civic space. This is perhaps what the definition of constructiveness hinges on – creating a digital civic space to improve the local area rather than just talk about it, is clearly significant. This does not require the creation of a shared vision within the community of what would be 'better' and it is debatable whether it is appropriate to use such a value laden term here since it is important that we have people maintaining as well as improving civil society.

4.6 Conclusion

The literature discussed in this chapter demonstrates that digital spaces can offer an alternative to the eParticipation platforms described in Chapter 3 section 3.1. These spaces work in conjunction with the content and content creators that use

them and figure 4.1 illustrates how these different elements can be seen to work together:

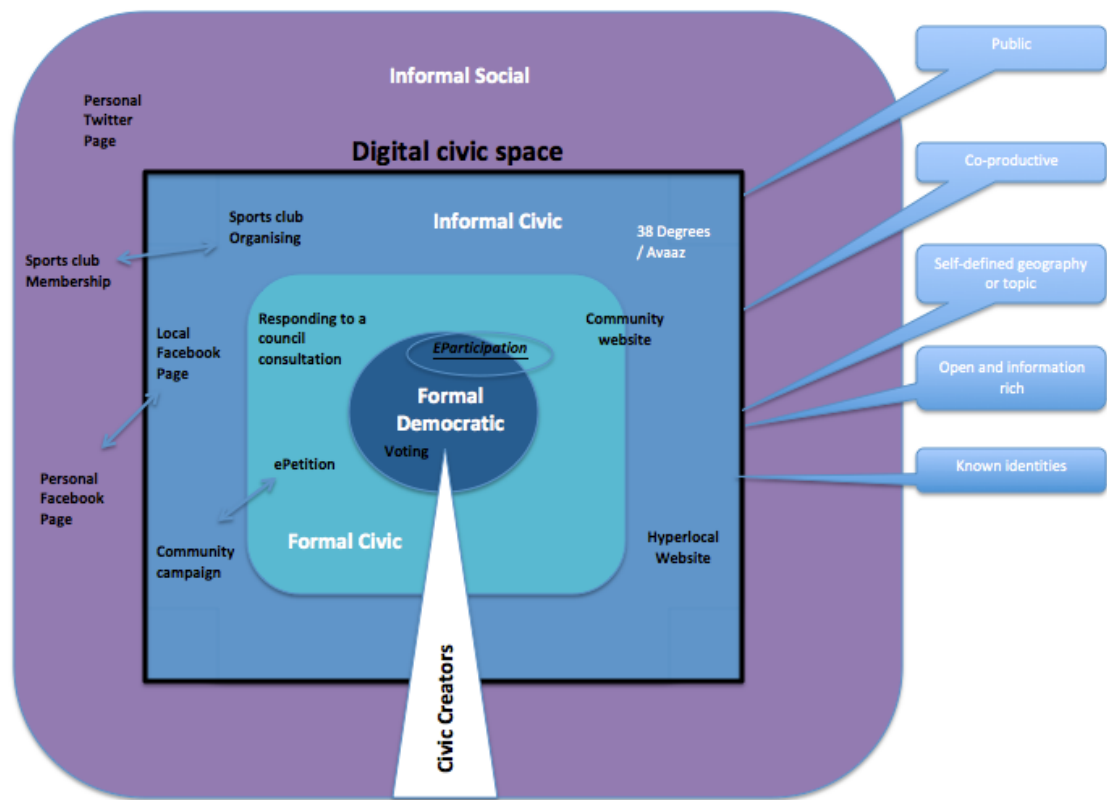


Figure 4.1: Digital civic space

While outlined here as distinction activities, context collapse online creates an absence of separation of formal from informal participation; although they may be separated in time these interactions are not separated in space. Deliberation and the public sphere are different aspects of a democratic society, but so are social and cultural interactions. Local digital civic spaces as described in this chapter bring these interactions together around a specific geography. While this does not link this participation to parallel activity in the offline space it does provide a single nexus for the online civic content that is being created.

The argument in this section is that deliberate engineering of digital civic space is required in order to provide an effective way of connecting the organic activity of citizens with the decision-making process, as a number of the qualities proposed for the design will not be in place without intervention. Rather than adopting Coleman and Blumler's (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) suggestion that government should create spaces that will facilitate the public telling their own stories, it is proposed that we connect spaces which are already being created by citizens in order to curate a new space, which then amplifies the fact that the public are already telling their stories.

The design criteria were developed to create digital civic space able to connect informal civic participation identified in the empirical work, with the formal decision-making processes of local government. The intention is that by making this connection we are able to increase democratic participation; this potential is discussed Chapter 7.

Accepting the fact that design criteria and design assumptions are significant with respect to behaviours (Norman 1999), and acknowledging the commercial design priorities of 'networked publics' we are already working within, this design seeks to accommodate the myriad motivations and intents of the civic creators who have no evident common pattern of behaviour beyond a desire to connect to their community and facilitate informal civic participation. In order to address the issue of democratic deficit and falling levels of participation, it is expedient to consider doing so by connecting with citizens in the places, and in the manner that they prefer. This is not just in terms of being digital - this is in response to the social

changes suggested by the development of a more networked society that suggests less hierarchical and more responsive systems.

The creation of digital civic space in this form will not on its own be enough to address the issue of democratic deficit. Community engagement practice and democratic process are two other elements highlighted in Chapter 3. Digital civic space is a new element that allows us to influence the realms of political communication and community engagement in ways that make them better able to respond to the social changes outlined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 describes the methodology adopted for the research in this thesis, and outlines the approach taken with each of the three field studies.

Chapter 5: Research methodology

This chapter describes the method used to examine the three research questions:

1. Can we consistently find online activity within defined geographic locations, that is both informal and civic?
2. Can we create digital civic space that will enable shared conversation among civic creators?
3. What specific qualities of digital space are influential in producing a good democratic experience?

The empirical work was aimed at developing and testing the design criteria introduced in Chapter 4. In other words, part of the experience of the action research approach method, which is examined in this chapter, has informed the design criteria already described. This departure from the hypothesising-deductive approach to research is characteristic of action research where intermediate outputs often shape later stages in the process. Ultimately, the action aim in the creation of digital civic space, is to contribute to increasing participation in civic activity, building the foundations for greater engagement in democratic decisions making and reducing democratic deficit.

The three research questions are addressed through a series of projects, representing a reflective process, which were designed to test the relevance and relative importance of the qualities described in Chapter 3, and to further refine them. The final project sought to utilise local digital civic space in order to increase participation in a specific local decision-making process.

The projects were designed and delivered as part of the author's professional role as Chief Executive and Lead Consultant with Public-i Group Ltd, and the issues that emerged as a result of this dual role are discussed in (section 5.6). The local government participants were all fee-paying clients and as such these participants had some influence over the design of the projects. They were all aware and supportive of the action research method and the wider research objectives of these projects; where this relationship affected the design process, is documented in this chapter, and the impact of this dynamic is discussed in more detail below.

The research questions are discussed in more detail and the action research approach and the challenges that emerged are described. The categorisation used in the data collection and data analysis for each project is described

5.1 Question 1: Can we consistently find online activity within defined geographic locations, that is both informal and civic?

At the beginning of this research, there was an assumption of informal civic activity being present, so this question was not included until after the first project (Ch. 4 section 4.3, Table 2). The first project - the Virtual Town Hall - was predicated on informal activity being both present and identifiable, based on the views of project participants (see section 5.8). However, this proved not to be the case and the participants in the first project struggled with the process of identifying relevant digital activity. This question was therefore added in order to

support the creation of a more systematic evidence base for tracing significant civic participation in projects two and three.

This systematic evidence base was crucial for the project participants' (Local Authority Officers) ability to demonstrate the fact that this activity was persistent rather than exceptional. This affected the overall research design for this thesis since it was important that the succeeding two projects would have wider applicability for all participants in terms of understanding local online civic activity. The design of project two was developed in order to meet both this requirement and my research purpose.

As discussed in Chapter 2, definition of the geography of search is critical for defining what is meant by 'local'. In this work the geography of search was defined by the project sponsor (see Ch. 6 section 6.3.1), but also needed to be further defined by the communities identified through the search process since it is their narratives and content that describe and in some ways create the place (Massey 2005). For example, the instigator of a search may define the area in terms of ward boundaries, while the citizen may envisage it in terms of specific streets or estates. The purpose of the search is to address both of these conditions.

Characterisation of the content and spaces with respect to being informal and civic, is discussed later in this chapter.

5.2 Question 2: Can we create a digital civic space that brings together these civic creators in a single shared conversation?

As discussed in previous chapters, digital civic spaces can be created by citizens. One of the legacies of the eParticipation literature is an understanding that the public will not necessarily use digital civic spaces created by government. Project one addresses this question from the perspective of the local authority being the instigator of online civic activity (i.e. eParticipation). Subsequent projects focused on citizen activity as the basis of the digital civic space design process. All three projects used the design principles outlined in Chapter three.

This refocusing prompted an examination of whether or not it was possible to connect the different citizen and community voices encountered online within a single digital civic space, and to promote a shared conversation, in order to overcome the highly fractionated environment found online, and overcome the tendency for online participation to focus on interactions with like-minded people.

The first research question explores digital civic spaces created by communities and individuals; the second question examines whether it is possible to connect these disparate communities to promote a single shared conversation to support and contribute to democratic decision-making. The requirement for a single shared conversation includes the need for an awareness of each other among the contributors to the conversation.

The term 'shared' reflects the proposal that a digital civic space should enable a citizen-centred approach to community engagement (see Ch. 3 section 3.3) and also refers to the key design principle of co-production outlined in Chapter 4.

The term 'conversation' refers to two aspects of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.7). The first is Coleman's (Coleman, 2005b) suggestion that political communication should shift from being considered to consultation to becoming more conversational. The second refers to the less mediated and more interactive nature of the citizen-politician relationship (Blumler & Coleman, 2010; Gurevitch et al., 2009).

To understand the necessity for creating a new kind of digital civic space, it is necessary to explore the digital civic spaces being created by the public, and to examine them against the criteria developed in the theoretical part of this work.

5.3 Question 3: What are the specific qualities of that space which are influential in terms of bringing about a good democratic experience?

The design criteria described in the previous chapter propose these qualities, and this question is focused on examining whether these criteria are present in the digital civic spaces searched for and created during the fieldwork.

This question is predicated on the belief that digital civic space might have specific affordances, which can be built or emphasised and which can make a good democratic experience more likely for the participant. A good democratic process

does not necessarily mean that the actor receives the outcome he or she agrees with, but it provide satisfaction that the process has been run well (Lowndes et al., 2006a).

5.4 Choosing a research approach

The initially planned research approach was social science experimentation to measure changes in behaviours following the interventions planned as part of the Virtual Town Hall work. Three data collection instruments were designed:

1. project workshops involving all participants;
2. data collection from the Virtual Town Hall platform to measure user behaviour to show the changes resulting from specific interventions (e.g. sending an email, starting a consultation, creating a new piece of user generated content);
3. a questionnaire administered to project sponsors to obtain their reactions to the project and its impact.

However, the Virtual Town Hall sites were not open to the public (see Ch 6, Section 6.2), thus, only the first and third of these data collection approaches was possible. This set-back caused me to reflect on my approach and the 'framing' of the research, which, up to that point, had been situated largely within the eParticipation literature. The experience of the Virtual Town Hall project, although invaluable, meant an adjustment of my research approach for several reasons:

- I had to re-evaluate the eParticipation approach adopted so far;

- I had to consider more deeply the role of the different participants and reconsider the role of the project collaborators – they became participants in the research;
- I changed the research focus to civic and democratic participation outside of the government space.

The experience of the Virtual Town Hall project also emphasised the challenges brought by combining research and practice and how they were amplified by responsibility for project design and delivery. I realised that I needed to re-evaluate my research approach and in so doing, consider a number of issues:

- I had a great deal of control over the research environment. However, this control was tempered by the need to meet client and participant objectives;
- I would be working with highly experimental projects with a degree of risk (perceived or real) for the project participants, which meant that they needed to be fully involved in the research process;
- I wanted to be more consciously open to learning from the other participants and their experience.

I considered several other approaches the first being ethnography which is used in much of the literature drawn on for this work (Boyd, 2007b; Ito, 2005; Turkle, 2011); however, it is not an experimental method accordingly was not suitable for the planned field work.

Participant observation was also considered along with Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR “tempers this expert knowledge with the expertise of locals

about their own problems and solutions” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 248) which might have been an appropriate choice because of the involvement of others. However, since the move to use action research occurred after the first project had started meant that drawing on local expertise would have been imperfect at best as it would not have been consistent throughout the research. A further consideration was that participatory approaches also require the active participation of all the actors and, in the case of the second project, there would have been practical difficulties in involving ‘virtual’ actors in the form of the civic creators who were often not aware that their publicly available content was being examined. This again led me to adjust my approach and adopt an action research method.

Action research, according to Lewin (Lewin 1946) is based on the belief that knowledge is created from problem solving in real life situations, and provides a research framework that enabled the integration of theory and practice, but also made sense of the substantial contributions to this work by other participants. This choice also acknowledges the effect of the work and acknowledges that the action within action research affects both the researcher and the project participants. It acknowledges the changes in opinions and stances that the research process made to my own thinking.

The decision to use an action research approach meant a profound change in my relationship to the work, and an acknowledgement of my own participation as an actor in all three projects. It required a departure in my thinking from a techno-

deterministic viewpoint to a view of participants as central to the solution being developed.

5.5 An action research approach

Action research can take a number of different forms (Reason & Bradbury, 2005). It acknowledges my role as project instigator in most instances, and satisfies the need for outsider positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2005) which describes the role of the researcher as both observer and participant. This research draws mostly on action research related to the field of education, which is nuanced towards the researcher as the leader of a research group. As a practitioner, I had considerable influence over the way the research sites were designed and implemented, which suggested it was more appropriate to adopt an approach that allowed me to exercise this influence and also to construct a research agenda around the actions in which I participated (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

The ethics of dealing with online content are discussed elsewhere in this thesis (section 5.5). However, there is a logical difficulty related to the process of researching the potential for a more co-productive and participatory relationship with the public online and this is the difficulty of including the participation of those actors in the research process. Freire in his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire, 1970; Herr & Anderson, 2005) suggests a complete collapse of the academic research model and while I would not suggest that the civic creators found by this research are particularly oppressed, it could be argued that the behaviour of a political elite contributes to the democratic deficit. Heron's (Heron

& Reason, 1997; Reason & Heron, 2002) less political approach of co-operative enquiry would also all the civic creators to be treated as participants in this work as opposed to research subjects.

The practical issues of dealing directly with civic creators and the need to deal with the primary participants, the local authority project sponsors, resulted in more participatory models being discarded in favour of an action research approach with myself as the primary researcher.

The other 'partner' in this work is my company, Public-i, whose participation took the form of research work and the Citizenscape technology (see section 5.7) used to support these projects, which is a commercial product of Public-i. The projects described here contributed to the company's product design including Citizenscape, and the creation of the research service Social Media Audits. As Chief Executive of the company, I have made research a company activity which helps ensure that the balance between research and client requirements is appropriately to be acceptable to all parties and to reduce the potential for conflicts of interest.

The action research cycle of 'Observe, Reflect, Act, Evaluate, Modify' (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Robson, 1993) acknowledge that, as actors, we have a view on outcomes and that it is possible to be active in the workplace while ensuring academic rigour in self-reflection and learning about the work. It acknowledges Habermas's view that knowledge is always value laden, and from a specific perspective which should be clear within the work.

I conducted this self reflection via my personal blog,³⁶ which brought several advantages (and disadvantages) as discussed below. One element of action research that was central to effective use of this approach in this context was the need to balance action and learning within the additional complexity of the supplier-client relationship. This approach involved the active participation of colleagues and clients, and would not have been possible without considerable good will and co-operation from all of the people involved.

Action research can be said to be both morally committed and value laden (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006), and supports examination of one's interventions in order to improve outcomes within one's environment and practice. As a result there is a need for the researcher to understand her values and intent, and to measure activity against these. This caused me to reflect on my values with respect to this whole agenda, and, for example, to 'own' the fact that I believe that democratic participation is as much a responsibility as it is a right, and that my desire for greater democratic participation is as much a moral as a practical position. Perhaps, more fundamentally, this reflection caused me to consider my belief in the potential of the social web to address the issue of democratic deficit as rooted in a belief in the positive cultural qualities of the social web as discussed in Ch 2, Section 2.4.

Action research should be centred around the individual with the practitioner and her relationship and impacts on the outside world being the main topic of enquiry.

³⁶ <http://curiouscatherine.wordpress.com> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

While stopping short of auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) much of my work involved reflection on my work within the described projects, and also on my wider experience with the social web. Where action research differs from best practice standards of self-reflection is that it also seeks to create an evidence base which can open the work to public scrutiny; it is this aspect of action research practice that highlights the relevance of blogging one's work.

The action researcher needs a malleable and developing idea of what knowledge is, and a commitment to the idea that knowledge of itself is value laden. Similarly, it is helpful for the action researcher to have only a weak belief in the existence of 'an answer' and a stronger belief in the need to experience, collaborate and create knowledge – knowledge is not sitting there waiting to be found out, it must be created (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Given the rapid pace of change, both socially and technologically, within the environment of the social web an action research approach is a reasoned response to the need to both capture knowledge, and experience the environment as it changes.

5.4.1 Blogging as reflexive practice

A research journal is a central element of action research practice and is used for personal reflection and to capture the experience of research contemporaneously rather than through the filter of time (Herr & Anderson, 2005). At the outset of my fieldwork, even before adopting an action research approach, I created an online research journal – a blog – to capture my research intent as well as the outcomes.

I have included this section as a more detailed reflection of my experience of academic blogging since this is a relatively new although increasing practice. More formal academic blogs, for example, the LSE Politics blog,³⁷ are now quoted and referenced in academic dialogue and since I embarked on my research I have encountered increasing numbers of doctoral researchers who blog regularly. Blogging has been described as a developing element of academic identity and, in terms of presentation, the blog can be seen as the academic's 'digital face' (Boyd, 2006). What is less developed is a sense of the blog as a research tool as opposed to simply being a tool of digital representation (Kirkup, 2010).

The blog represents my participation in the online environment which I am researching, and gives me a connection to the content creators I encountered in the fieldwork. It is a symbol of my participant status and allows me as a researcher the opportunity to immerse myself in the world that I am examining. It provides an emotional as well as a practical connection to the context I am investigating.

When I started writing up my thesis in Autumn 2010 I set myself a target of 3000 words per week of content on the blog, content intended to be included in the thesis, and usually managed to come close to this. This decision has been central to this work. Beyond the direct benefits of action research thinking, the blog helped me to consider and resolve a number of other issues, which I discuss below:

³⁷ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/> (Retrieved 20.02.13).

Public Presence

Public scrutiny is an essential element of academic work. It can be a daunting idea at the start of a course of study or research – becomes much more so six months in when the full extent of one's ignorance dawns. Blogging is an excellent introduction to this 'publicity', and the fact that one joins a community of people who are all thinking and writing online is reassuring and supportive. I was lucky to receive only occasional negative comments on the site, and since they were anonymous I feel justified about not posting them. Many researchers do not get to experience publicity until much later in their work when they try to get an article published. The more formal peer review process is harsher than the less systematic scrutiny that a blog attracts, and in many ways final publication lacks the sense of 'public-ness' that the blog provides. To benefit fully, it is necessary to read and as well as write within this community - the social web is built on reciprocity.

5.4.2 Reflection and evidence

I used the blog to create an action research diary and also as a way of organising the literature review and other large elements of this dissertation work. One of the many things I learned later, was the need to theme and tag the work within the blog to enable easier access to threads of thought for later use. This was especially important because many of themes that emerged from the research were not initially self-evident. More thorough action research within the blog environment would require slightly more structured evidence of reflection than I have included in the thesis. For projects conducted subsequent to the projects for this thesis I am continuing to use the blog for more public reflection.

Another aspect of the reflective aspect of the blog is the way which it helped me to separate my professional role from my research activities. Creating the 'curiouscatherine' online persona for my research allowed me to clearly signal my research work and keep it separate from my corporate websites and commercial activities. Of course, there is some cross over. but the discipline of a separate site and separate persona helped to manage this while also providing the transparency that is important for my relationships with the research sites and the wider audience.

5.4.3 Authenticity and acceptance

Authenticity is an essential element of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 23). The social web is an environment where evidence of one's authenticity is represented by personal contributions. Being an active participant in the social web, allowed me to connect better with and discuss the effects of participants with the actors in the informal digital civic space to whom I spoke in the course of this research - I 'earned' my place. The participation also made me more credible to the local authority participants since I incorporated in my person practice the ideas discussed within each of the projects.

5.4.4 The limitations

I would recommend this approach to other PhD candidates. However, the modular nature of the writing process has meant that integrating the content into a coherent thesis has been an especially huge task. Were I to repeat the exercise of

doctoral research, I would pay more attention to structure and planning at the start of the process to mitigate this. There is also the issue of style; blog content is less informal and self-reflective than formal academic writing. Writing style and tone are often a problem PhD students; in my case, I think the problem was compounded by the bulk of the thesis content being written in a non-academic style which has necessitated extensive editing and rewriting. Nevertheless, I consider it a very effective way of working and one that I have adopted for subsequent research projects.

There are substantive challenges to creating a public and accessible action research diary. I became progressively more comfortable with the degree of detail I included in my blog posts but I also found it impossible not to self-censor at least to some extent in order to serve the needs of client, project participant and commercial relationship. I discuss this in the next section.

5.5 The ethical questions

“While the researcher’s positionality in relation to the setting is important, it is often no simple matter to define one’s position.” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 32)

One of the motivations for using an action research approach was its practical and value driven research mind-set which helps to manage the tension between being a practitioner and a researcher. There is an additional aspect to this tension when one is a consultant/supplier to the process rather than running the project or project within one’s organisation. Action research requires that anyone within the context of your research sites understands that they are being used for study and

that you have their consent for their inclusion in this process. I managed this by being very clear with clients where the work was directly relevant to my research, and during data collection I included a disclosure statement in the questionnaire.

Where the boundaries become less clear is in relation to my comments on sites and content creators with whom I am not involved. I decided that for sites used in the final thesis, I would contact the site owners to inform them that I was commenting on and including their work. Where content is public I considered there was no need to seek permission per se (assuming there was no restrictive copyright on content), however, I believe that the courtesy of informing these site owners was important.

When acting as a consultant, as with any consultancy, it is important to be clear about where the work intersects with other interests, and what the consultant as researcher will be taking from the engagement as research outputs. All of these are fairly usual ethical dilemmas. In relation to software development decisions within the business it was more problematic. Fortunately, others in the company are involved in deciding what should be developed. There is a development team and we work actively with our user group. Nevertheless it would be disingenuous not to admit that I have a great deal of influence on the process. The Public-i team see the input from clients who work with us as invaluable for product development. The additional participation with the research process described here, providing a framework for rigorous examination of the effects of the software, is also valued. While many commercial developers have the intention to be conduct rigorous

testing, it can be difficult to ensure that this happens, and any external pressure can tip the balance in favour of greater discipline in this area.

This process was supported by a separate decision made by Public-i, again led by myself, to embrace what we refer to as 'open practice' with respect to the relationship with clients and other partners, and this translates into wider sharing of test results and other development information than is usual in more 'closed' business cultures.

Public-i is not working in an established market – and it is not clear what the right solution would be to help citizens and government have 'better' conversations online and, as a result, make better decisions, based on the use of social web technologies. This introduces another dimension to the dilemma in that what I believe might work for the client is not always what would sell, and the software design process that resulted in the creation of Citizenscape was influenced by the need to create something that had a reasonable chance of commercial success. By publicly and openly combining research and commercial agendas the company is able to support more innovative software design by involving clients in the development process, but this does mean that it is not always possible to make entirely research-oriented decisions.

An example of this is moderation tools. I am firmly of the view that government should not be moderating digital civic spaces – even were government able to afford the administrative overhead. It is not possible to co-produce a solution if one party effectively has the ability to censor the other. Power must be shared. I

believe it is necessary to trust people, agree some rules of behaviour and then take shared responsibility for the content. Clients who are active and experienced online tend to accept this degree of risk; clients who are new to the social web tend to consider the level of risk unacceptable. Within the project process, this was managed via negotiation with the client about the terms and conditions of use of the site being commissioned. The risk was managed technically through the compromise of integrating third party tools that allow moderation. Taking client considerations into account when making decision choices forces the researcher to be open to new ideas and external beliefs with respect to project design. I see this as a strength of the action research approach where experience of working in the field can be seen to improve the enquiry process. Where compromises are made it is important to ensure that data are collected about the experience in order to ensure that a case against can be made more emphatically in the future, or to develop a new and enriched position on the point of contention.

At my annual research committee meetings I was repeatedly asked whether I saw a conflict between being a supplier and being a researcher, and the committee was always intrigued about what I would do were the research to show that the software approach was flawed. My (perhaps prejudiced) attitude was that, why on earth would we want to deliver software that would not stand up to scrutiny? Either the software has the effect expected or it does not - or more likely in the case of experimental projects such as those studied here, it has some unexpected effects as well. Whatever the outcome, it is in the long term interests of stakeholders to capture the findings and learn from the experience, and if framed in this way to the client in advance rather than post hoc, then it is possible to avoid

major compromises with this approach for either the research or the commercial experience. Anyone working commercially to develop new products has these dilemmas, and 'pure' researchers run the risk of becoming too attached to a theory to 'let it go' in the face of new evidence.

The pressure to compromise in the research agenda comes from both the client and the commercial perspective with respect to the difficulty of sharing setbacks and failures in equal measure to success, rather than in the form of design or data collection. While there is much rhetoric in the local government 'innovation' space about the importance and value of failure,³⁸ it is still something that many clients find difficult to discuss publicly. As a small business, Public-i is also not keen to publish negative results in order not to damage reputation. I found myself more hesitant about blogging about setbacks and problems compared to successful outcomes, but the discipline of the action research approach was instrumental in ensuring that I documented the complete experience. By setting a research context with other stakeholders before the projects started, I was able to write freely about each of the projects included in this thesis research.

There is also the question of the values on which action research should be based and my personal values, which manifest themselves in my research as in other aspects of my professional life. They incorporate a belief that openness and honesty are essential elements of professional behaviour and, in this sense, the

³⁸ Examples of this include the Public Services Lab run by NESTA (National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts) which was designed to support and encourage innovation in public services (http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab)(Retrieved 16.02.13).

action research blogging process allowed me to substantiate this in public. In turn, the evidence base of the blog supported my discussions with clients as we negotiated the project design. The blog also allowed me to express my values in relation to a range of issues with respect to public engagement and democratic participation in public, and this contributed to effective negotiation with clients and other project partners when discussing project design. This last point is where the academic and commercial world cross over. In my view it is bad business and bad thinking to try to convince people to do things that you do not believe will help them.

5.6 Project design

In common with many candidates, I had been considering attempting a PhD for some time prior to starting this work, and I began exploring some of the issues and ideas described in this thesis as part of an evaluation of an EU funded Framework 7 eDemocracy project called Citizenscape (Howe, 2010). The Citizenscape project examined the practical considerations that must be addressed in establishing the use of Web 2.0 tools and techniques as a means to create measurable democratic outcomes, and as was, on reflection, heavily influenced by the eParticipation literature discussed in Chapter 2. The project looked at how community created content could be used within a council consultation process by creating digital civic spaces (Howe, 2009, 2010) and one of the primary findings was the limitation of this approach with respect to ensuring that citizens are engaged with the issue that is the subject of the consultation. Citizens had far wider interests and were not

easily focused on a single issue, or constrained by a formal process. The Virtual Town Hall project sought to build on this observation and to create a digital space where content was dictated by citizens and not by the council.

In carrying out the fieldwork for this thesis the initial research plan was to create a staged project around the Virtual Town Hall project (described below) and though action research elements were used (such as a research journal in the form of the blog) this was not the main methodology employed.

This changed when the findings from the first stage of this project highlighted a bias in the project design which prevented progress, and as a result informed the design of the two subsequent projects and led the researcher to consider more deeply the question of bias in design thinking and to adopt the more rigorous action research approach. This reflection is captured and discussed in Chapter 6.

As a result of this reflection the focus in the second project moved from local government as the primary actor in the project to informal civic activity online which was found outside of the formal democratic conversation instigated by local government. The second project, the Social Media Audit, was developed in order to provide a repeatable method for finding this informal civic participation. The final project, project three, approached the concept of engineered digital civic space by delivering the community engagement element for the CRIF - Cambridgeshire Renewal Infrastructure Framework.

5.7 Technology platform: Citizenscape

In cases where sites were created specifically for the projects they were created using the Citizenscape platform produced by Public-i Group Ltd following a European project of the same name (Howe, 2010). Citizenscape has core features that relate directly to the design of digital civic space described in Chapter four:

Feature	Relationship to design criteria
It aggregates content from 'trusted voices' within the community via RSS and other feeds. Once these feeds are in place there is no content moderation	This provides content curation as opposed to moderation
An aggregated tag cloud and filtering features help to display common themes and concerns across all contributors	This is intended to communicate the 'publicness' of the platform where it is possible to easily see the range of voices involved
You can authenticate against the platform and provide enough demographic data to reassure the host that you are a citizen of their locality	The digital civic spaces proposed rely on being able to associate content with place
Once you have done this the platform is able to distinguish between citizens/non-citizens on a self reported basis	This satisfies the requirement of being able to know the identity of participants
The platform can aggregate content from the trusted voices and the make this available via embeddable code for use on the content source websites	This is intended to ensure that the platform supports networked behaviour as opposed to creating an additional content platform

Table 5.1: Features of Citizenscape

The product is implemented in an open source (LAMP³⁹) architecture and other open source tools, but is sold as a licensed and hosted product rather than being made available as open source code. The code choices involve open standards and formats, but stop short of open source licensing because of commercial restrictions. The project sites also lack an open API, which would open up the digital civic space to wider technical participation. This use of licensed code rather than open source, which is indicated by the literature, was a restriction imposed by

³⁹ LAMP refers to the 'stack' of open source technologies used; Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP

the commercial environment in which this work was conducted. In my view, this was a limitation of the project and warrants further examination in future research. It introduced the additional difficulty of linking research findings to specific code developments, and further increased the dependence on the licensed software. To mitigate this, I have deliberately kept the descriptions in the digital civic space design chapter generic, and although we used the Citizenscape platform for the work, there are no functional limitations with respect to applying the findings to other environments.

Citizenscape is not at the time of writing a 'finished' product and was released in a beta version.⁴⁰ As later in this section this has had a knock-on effect on this research. There is a tension between trying to create a commercial product at the same time as conducting academic research, related to ensuring that development and research cycles are complementary. The issue of licensed code vs open source software is an area where this tension is most obvious and it could be argued that the decision to proceed on the basis of a proprietary format compromises the entire endeavour. This is not an issue that was addressed during this research; instead the project has acknowledged this as a known issue that will need to be looked at in the future. The use of open source software sends a signal to users about the nature of the environment where it is used, which are aligned with the signals described in the design chapter, particularly with the qualities of openness and information, as well as signalling a willingness and ability to work in a co-

⁴⁰ Beta releases of software are used by developers to get early user feedback on products. They are released clearly labelled as being still under development and usually invite user feedback on functionality and design.

productive way. All of these features can be delivered via other licensing models. Open source is a more obvious 'fit' with the objectives of the Citizenscape platform if the commercial considerations raised by a change in the business model for the platform can be addressed.

5.8 Project one: The Virtual Town Hall

The Virtual Town Hall project, undertaken specifically in connection with this thesis, sought to actively create a digital civic space as proposed in Chapter 4. The design of the civic space in this first project was closer in nature to national government's civic commons described by Blumler and Coleman (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) in that it was to be a local authority-led initiative. In order to counter criticisms of eParticipation resulting from the government centric view of the democratic relationship (Chadwick, 2011; Gaventa, 2006), the planned design aggregated citizen-originated content at the same time as providing the opportunity for citizens to interact with more formal decision-making processes - for example, consultations and petitions. It was designed as an attempt to address all three of the research questions in parallel. Five councils were recruited on a commercial basis (but for a nominal fee) to participate and were asked to explore both the concept and the technology platform - Citizenscape - that Public-i had created as a result of the earlier EU funded Citizenscape project described in the previous section. Each of the councils participating shared an interest in exploring how the social web might help to address the issue of democratic deficit they were experiencing in their localities. The design of the project was intended to connect

the participating local authorities with relevant members of the community within a new digital civic space (the Virtual Town Hall).

There were a number of observations from the original Citizenscape project that informed the initial concept for the Virtual Town Hall project. The main points were the importance of creating a co-productive unmoderated space, the need to involve elected representatives, and the premise that the agenda should not be controlled by the local authority to allow the co-evolution of activity and articulation of co-production. The Citizenscape project also highlighted issues related to democratic identity, and revealed citizens' need for a longer term commitment to the process of building trust in the process (Howe, 2010). These design principles formed the key elements of the design of the technology platform for the Virtual Town Hall pilot.

The project reflected the concepts discussed in Chapter 4 in terms of the design of digital civic space. The councils involved were Chorley Borough Council, Metropolitan District of Kirklees, Essex County Council, North Lincolnshire Council and the London Borough of Redbridge. Each of these sites participated in the initial set-up and scoping of the project. However, the only one that went live was Essex County Council and this was a read-only website rather than the interactive site envisaged by the project concept. That vision was described in the White Paper that introduced the project:

“Public institutions need some way to respond to the participation that they can see online so that they are not overwhelmed. One response would be to promote spaces that are not owned or designed by the media, where

deliberative debate can take place online and where the formal democratic process can connect with the Network Society in order to benefit from the participation of citizens. Some kind of online space is needed which will make it possible for citizens to interact with institutions online beyond the merely transactional basis which is currently supported by institutional websites. There is currently no Digital civic space which meets the needs that were previously fulfilled by the village or town hall or the formal debating chamber – something like a 21st Century Agora.” (Howe 2009)

One of the underlying assumptions of the project was that councils were the most appropriate actors to lead the process of creating this digital civic space and to take leading roles in creating and curating the space, helped by chosen community ambassadors. The community ambassadors, an idea that originated in the original Citizenscape project and was more fully explored in the Virtual Town Hall, would be citizens trained and ‘contracted’ by the council, to moderate the Virtual Town Hall.

The original intent was a two-stage data collection process to investigate the effects of the creation of these Virtual Town Hall sites from the point of view of local participants, and also with respect to local discussions that were to be active during the project time period. The first stage of data collection was involved two workshops with all participants and follow up sessions held at the different locations. It was clear by mid 2010 (nearly a year into the project) that the project sites were not ‘taking off’ and were unlikely to go live for public use. There were a number of practical reasons for this. Firstly, during the inception of this project, I changed roles within Public-i and took over as Chief Executive and this proved a major disruption to the Virtual Town Hall project. One of the impacts of the loss of focus caused by this, was delays in technology delivery and lost project time,

confidence and momentum. In addition, the 2010 comprehensive spending review imposed a 30% income reduction on council's throughout the UK.

Although these disruptions did have an influence, there were three more salient reasons for the project failing to proceed to the second stage:

- considerable institutional barriers within councils to working with the public online without content moderation;
- councils did not find it straightforward to work out which hyperlocal sites and individuals to work with to create the space;
- the role of community ambassador, which we had described for citizens, was not seen as appropriate by the active citizens we spoke to in the initial stages of this project.

There was significant learning from this first project - as can be seen in the next chapter, and data were gathered from these research sites as a result of the project workshops and associated correspondence, and via a final exit questionnaire. The results of this project were used to modify the design of the subsequent two projects, and widened the focus of this work to include greater emphasis on citizen driven content and activity.

5.9 Project two: Social media audits: Mapping digital civic activity

The second project built on the evaluation of the findings from the Virtual Town Hall and modified the premise that the local authority was the obvious instigator of

local civic activity online. This project focused on both finding and understanding the informal civic activity that was already happening within localities. It widened observation of the civic space beyond the local authority in order to include civic creators in a more central role in the research. The initial reflections from the Virtual Town Hall sites indicated that one of the major issues, once the Citizenscape Platform had been deployed, was provision of assistance in the process of finding and validating 'civic creators,' those who could and would be the main contributors to a digital civic space. The work of the Networked Neighbourhoods study and also more general political communications literature, indicated that these civic creators were likely to be present in local areas and confirmed the stated beliefs of the local authority participants in the project that this was the case. This second project was therefore designed in order to address the requirement that this activity be reliably findable. It had immediate practical utility in that it addressed the question of findable content, but also created the opportunity for more substantial observation of informal civic participation in each locality.

Rather than assuming, as the first project design implied, that in order to influence democratic decision-making civic participation needs to be formalised and managed by the council, this project acknowledged that civic creators were active and influential irrespective of the 'permissions' granted by the council. The intention of the Social Media Audit project was to define and discover civic content within a defined geographical area. This is content that is informal and user generated, but is aimed at the community - not just friends, family or peer groups.

Data were collected at four research sites in Cumbria, West Sussex, East Sussex and Wolverhampton. The data collection was carried out as commercial research work with additional permission gained in order to use the data for this thesis. In addition to the search activity described here, semi-structured interviews with project owners and civic creators were conducted by the author and by members of the team at Public-i working under the author's supervision.

Previous research on the effects of digital participation focuses on in-depth examination of specific communities (Bruns et al., 2008; Bruns, 2010; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a; Kavanaugh et al., 2005) or events (Ball & Lewis, 2011; Sarita Yardi & Boyd, 2010). This project was an attempt to systematically identify local civic participation as an ongoing and diverse group of online activities in order to create an evidence base enabling councils and other formal organisations to respond to it.

Much of the research conducted in this second project involved observation of online expression and, therefore, was not conducted with the knowledge of the civic creators, and their content has been included within the reports without explicit consent except where follow up interviews were conducted and permission for inclusion actively sought. This choice was based on the belief that the content examined was intended for community consumption, and that the work does not extract personal data from the public domain. There is active debate

about the ethics of using data in this way, which was considered (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2010), and both the research team and the research sponsors felt that ethical boundaries were not being breached. Where the research identifies people who the project sponsor would like to engage with on a specific topic (e.g. participation in a consultation process), then separate contact was made and permission sought for further interaction.

The Social Media Audit is a response to a problem that was highlighted as part of the Virtual Town Hall project where we had only an approximate guide regarding who might be appropriate to include as citizen participants in the digital civic space. It also provided an opportunity to gather more general observations about digital civic space. The Audit is a systematic piece of research that provides a representative snapshot of the local informal civic content, which can then be used to support informed decisions about whom to include in the initial iteration of the digital civic space. In practice, it also provided a list of people to contact, appropriate terms of reference to make contact, and a view of the interactions which already ongoing.

The purpose of the audit was to create an objective view of what is happening so that there is a starting point for engagement with the local online civic content creators. The method is not comprehensive, but it does provide a starting point that can be built on for further identification of actors. It is important that the output of the audit also provides the means to extend and continue to search so that the digital civic space is created in a state of always being open to new voices.

As should be clear, this is a systematic method, but it is also one that cannot be considered to be completely “objective” since it depends upon the researcher making value judgements about which sites should be included in the final result set and the digital civic space. The systematic nature of the selection process does serve to create a robust and replicable process producing an initial data set involving a process that is as transparent as possible in terms of qualification of the data included. The resulting data set is manageable for analysis and for prompting engagement with identified individuals for engagement purposes. The process does not represent an attempt to comprehensively measure ‘all’ the civic content in a location.

The audit is designed to serve not only as an overview of the informal civic participation in a specified area but also specifically to identify significant content creators who will be the most vocal contributors to the digital civic space. The choice of the word ‘significant’ is deliberate here – we were not trying to judge influence, but simply to identify active individuals.

Significance is a subjective term and is judged in this context against the qualities introduced in Chapter 4: identity, persistence, responsiveness and constructiveness (section 4.6). The most contentious of the criteria proved to be constructiveness - another way of looking at this is to say that the objective of the process is to find content and creators who/which would satisfy a simple code of conduct test as commonly found on most community websites. Codes of conduct exist to ensure that interactions are respectful and do not transgress some basic

principles of debate and the inclusion of this criterion is a largely a pragmatic decision since no council is going to put together or endorse a digital civic space that includes inappropriate content' However, it is one that has been continually reviewed during the research to help ensure that the space remains inclusive and open.

While the core approach was the same, the method of identifying sites was developed iteratively for each of the sites in line with the reflective nature of action research. For example, the coding for the West Sussex data (the first site audit conducted) categorized YouTube and Twitter sites, whilst this was abandoned in subsequent audits in favour of categories that were more descriptive of content. The process for creating the data set was also refined over the course of the research, for example more automation was used in the latter two audits.

5.9.1 Limitations of the method

In developing the audit process we (in this case the technical team at Public-i) considered using a semantic analysis approach. We included available tools that we were able to identify did not offer the sophistication of search combinations that we were after and, more importantly, are designed to find content rather than individuals.

It may be possible to achieve similar result through other techniques such as 'snowballing' or other referent-based search processes, but this would involve a labour intensive process of asking community participants to self-report activity

and connections. The concern with this approach is that many of the sites that we found described themselves as civic – but they are just people who are doing something that they think is interesting and they do not feel the need to define it. Also, this would only collect sites and individuals who are already networked to at even a very limited extent, and would not find isolated pockets of participation.

5.9.2 Conducting the audit

The audit process breaks down into the following stages:

1. Scoping the audit targets

In order to create a set of search terms the project sponsor was interviewed by someone from the project team and asked to define search terms based on real place names, and current content topics in the news and of general interest. These, along with the objectives of the research were captured in a project brief and signed off by the sponsor. The project team then carried out background research to highlight the expected level of social media use in the area. This included understanding broadband penetration and take-up as well as 3G services and demographic factors.

2. Creating the data set

A basic data set was created using a matrix defined by the set of search terms, ensuring that each place identified was searched using a standard Google search and selecting the first 20 results with respect to that place as well as the content

terms. In all cases, the same person carried out the searches in order to ensure that there are not differently weighted results for different search combinations. The data set was then refined using a set of logical criteria in order to reduce it to a manageable size for the next stage. This process was documented, but constitutes a proprietary element of the research which is available on request from the author.

The search terms were defined following discussion with the research client to discover:

- ‘real’ place names within the area as used by residents. These might be diminutives for the area as a whole (e.g. Wolves’ rather than ‘Wolverhampton, ‘Scunny’ rather than Scunthorpe) or might be the names of communities (e.g. ‘Bilston’ rather than ‘Bilston East’ which is the ward name)
- where content terms were used these refer to current topics, again in the language of the public rather than the client, which the project sponsor believes are relevant. Examples include ‘Anti-Social Behaviour’, ‘Fly-tipping’, ‘Dog mess’, and ‘Cuts’.

The data set was created in two stages. Firstly an automated search and data cleansing exercise based on search terms specific to the location being examined, and secondly through manual data qualification of the data set to refine it to the relevant sites. The search terms and scope of location were discussed as part of an initial project interview with the relevant local authority client.

The first stage uses an automated tool to carry out a Google search to retrieve the unqualified dataset, consisting of standard web search, Blogs, Facebook and Twitter. The main location is the are the locations identified at the initial site interview (e.g. East Sussex) and each search recorded the top 20 URLs retrieved from Google. The full list of searches includes:-

- Place Google search on each location in taxonomy.
- Place Google Blog search on each location in taxonomy.
- Place Facebook search on each location in taxonomy.
- Place Twitter search on each location in taxonomy.
- Place/category Google search on main location and category
- Place/category Google Blog search on main location and category
- Place/category Facebook search on main location and category
- Place/category Twitter search on main location and category

The search captures URLs, search terms and Google ranking.

3. Qualifying the data set

Field	Description	Acceptable Values
Website Name	The name of the website	Any
Type	Public-i classification of Social media sites, for an explanation of each see the SMA report template, section 5	Individual, Media, Political, Non-social / Traditional, Community of Interest, Campaigns, Hyperlocal,

		Facebook
URL	The whole URL (known technically as the 'fully qualified URL') for the page. This will be pre-filled by the search process.	Any absolute URL
Description/Comment	Useful comments about the site	Any
Alternative Links	Other links that also refer to this site	Any absolute URLs, comma separated
Significant Creator	A flag to show if this URL is a significant creator	"Yes" or Blank
Dissemination	A flag set to whether this site should be looked at in more detail by the Lead Consultant	"Yes" or Blank
Location Category	Top level locations for this audit specified in the project brief, e.g. districts for a county audit	Only those specified in the location taxonomy in the project brief
Sub Location	Local names given to places specified in the project brief	Only those specified in the location taxonomy in the project brief
Content Category	Categories specified in the project brief. Additional categories may be added with prior agreement of the Project Manager (seeking advice from Lead Consultant)	Any tagging category specified in the project brief plus "Place" or any others agreed by the Lead Consultant
Search Terms	The search terms that returned the URL, this will be prefilled from the search process.	Any
Number of followers	The number of followers (Twitter URLs only)	Any number

Area/Interest/URL (Facebook Groups Only)	The area interest that it has been grouped in (Facebook only)	Any area interest in the Facebook
Likes (Facebook only)	The number of likes this page has (Facebook only)	Any number
Members (Communities)	The number of Members the community has if available	Any number

Table 5.2: Data collection format for Social media Audits

Once the data set was refined as far as automatic and rule-based processes would allow, the remaining sites were manually qualified and categorised. Sites were reviewed and checked to see if they met the ‘informal civic’ criteria described in Chapter 3. After the initial audit at West Sussex sites were also checked for significance according to the criteria of identity, persistence, responsiveness and constructiveness (defined in Ch. 4 section 4.6.1.) Only if they met these two tests were they included in the final data set.

The process of data qualification was undertaken by a number of different project team members, and Table 4 presents the kinds of rules that were applied in order to make data decisions although these rules were under constant review and emerged through the course of the Social Media Audit process. In order to ensure consistency of data categorisation, project results were sampled and checked throughout the process and the author then checked and signed off on the data set before proceeding to the analysis (Ch 4. section 4.5).

In addition to qualifying the data for inclusion the manual checks on the data were designed to code the data and also to judge the content found against the criteria listed in Ch 4 section 4.5. Table 5.3 presents the data collected for each site:-

Field	Description	Acceptable Values
Website Name	The name of the website	Any
Type	Public-i classification of Social media sites, for an explanation of each see the SMA report template, section 5	Individual, Media, Political, Non-social / Traditional, Community of Interest, Campaigns, Hyperlocal, Facebook
URL	The whole URL (known technically as the 'fully qualified URL') for the page. This will be pre-filled by the search process.	Any absolute URL
Description/Comment	Useful comments about the site	Any
Alternative Links	Other links that also refer to this site	Any absolute URLs, comma separated
Significant Creator	A flag to show if this URL is a significant creator	"Yes" or Blank
Dissemination	A flag set to whether this site should be looked at in more detail by the Lead Consultant	"Yes" or Blank

Location Category	Top level locations for this audit specified in the project brief, e.g. districts for a county audit	Only those specified in the location taxonomy in the project brief
Sub Location	Local names given to places specified in the project brief	Only those specified in the location taxonomy in the project brief
Content Category	Categories specified in the project brief. Additional categories may be added with prior agreement of the Project Manager (seeking advice from Lead Consultant)	Any tagging category specified in the project brief plus “Place” or any others agreed by the Lead Consultant
Search Terms	The search terms that returned the URL, this will be prefilled from the search process.	Any
Number of followers	The number of followers (Twitter URLs only)	Any number
Area/Interest/ URL (Facebook Groups Only)	The area interest that it has been grouped in (Facebook only)	Any area interest in the Facebook
Likes (Facebook only)	The number of likes this page has (Facebook only)	Any number
Members (Communities)	The number of members the community has if available	Any number

Table 5.3: Data Collection for Social media Audit

4. Data analysis

The initial analysis was statistical and looked for patterns in the data. These were further explored through limited case studies and/or social network analysis of the online networks revealed.

5.10 Project three: CRIF engagement project

The final project also addressed all three research questions. Rather than creating a digital civic space and preparing to populate it, the third project used the social media audit process described in project two and then connected the activities identified in order to support and encourage participation in a local authority run engagement project, with participation in the civic space secondary to this objective.

This work was undertaken as a commercial exercise with ex ante agreement from the client for the research work described to be conducted. This project was the most commercially constrained of the three due to the contract terms of the sponsorship. There was an imperative to ensure that the client (described below) was able to evidence adequate community engagement activity in order to support its decision-making process. However, since the project design, including the emphasis in the design on the use of co-production and the creation of the civic space, was presented as part of the tender process for the award of the work contract, this did not put undue pressure on the process. Rather than a 'civic commons' (Blumler & Coleman, 2001), the civic space was closer to and was designed to be closer to Boyd's (Boyd, 2010) description of a 'networked public' with an "intersection of people, technology and practice". The decision to adopt a

co-productive community engagement approach was based on the client constraint that the process be designed in order to create a legacy of citizens interested in and willing to act on the results of the project, and a resultant acknowledgment that this constraint would pass power from politicians to citizens to some extent (Bovaird, 2007).

5.10.1 What is the CRIF?

The project was the creation of a Cambridgeshire Renewable Infrastructure Framework (CRIF). Put simply, the project was attempting to firstly gauge the potential for renewable energy projects within the region and then identify potential pathways for attracting investment and instigating projects to deliver this. It was instigated by a local quango, Cambridgeshire Horizons, and involved Public-i being commissioned to run the public engagement element of the project. The CRIF project aimed to describe a cross organisational framework agreement and plan which would help maximise opportunities to increase energy security in the area, ensure that the majority of energy was from sustainable sources and realising an estimated £6bn of potential inward investment. Public-i worked alongside the client, Cambridgeshire Horizons, and the technical consultants, CAMCO, which researched the feasibility and potential capacity for renewable infrastructure in the county. The team was joined by the National Energy Foundation (NEF) in the final stages of the work, which helped to develop ideas with the community groups involved. This group, consisting of Public-i, Cambridgeshire Horizons, CAMCO and NEF is referred to as the CRIF Project team throughout.

Cambridgeshire Horizons had a track record of co-ordinating projects across different organisations in the county despite which is unusual for a non-elected body as most of the actual decisions it was coordinating falling into the purview of democratic decision-making bodies at both the District and County level. Its successful track record, the trust that the Horizons team had within the county, and the fact that Horizons was in the process of being wound up⁴¹ and as a result needed to secure faster results, meant that it was ready to trial a different engagement method – hence, the openness to the approach described in this work.

The other element in this was that 50% of the funding for this part of the project was from an organisation called Sustainability East which describes itself as:

.....an independent, not for profit social enterprise based in Cambridge. We work collaboratively with all sectors to facilitate debate and action on climate change and sustainability. Our focus is on helping organisations make decisions that are informed and considered.

Sustainability East was keen to see a much bolder approach to community engagement since one of its concerns about the project was that prevailing local politics was making hindering progress towards the environmental goals.

These different factors meant that the project sponsors were ready to try an engagement approach that would focus on the power and reach of the community participants as opposed to being driven by the democratic decision makers.

⁴¹ Cambridgeshire Horizons ceased trading as an operational company in September 2011.

The project design combined elements of the first and second projects, but looked at these from the point of view of actively intervening in the networks that were found in order to encourage and facilitate greater involvement in decision-making. The design was similar to the Virtual Town Hall in that it was an attempt to connect informal civic activity online with the decision-making process, but with the critical difference of the first step being the social media audit rather than the creation of the digital civic space. Finding the participants and creating the digital civic space were secondary and reflected the people found rather than the pre-existing beliefs of the council.

Another important difference was that this project had a specific objective - the need to 'engage' the public around a specific project rather than the abstract objective of the Virtual Town Hall. We therefore focused less on the digital civic space and more on the creation of the networks that would form that space. This third project focused on using the digital civic space and the networks rather than on its abstract nature which made progress simpler in relation to both participants and project sponsors.

5.10.2 What were we trying to achieve?

The project had two main objectives:

1. to reach as many people as possible in order to discuss the CRIF proposition;
2. to create a network of people who would want to use the CRIF once it was created.

The second objective was significant in that most engagement work is measured passively with respect to its reach; in this case we wanted to ensure that the work was focused on creating an output that people wanted to use, and on the networks they would need to support this.

In addition, the team needed to ensure a balance between the three stakeholder groups - community, public sector and business - and make sure that the project retained political 'cover' throughout the process. Finally, Sustainability East was keen that the approach should be documented so that it could be evaluated for use in other areas as a more formal method. The work has been written up separately for publication by Sustainability East.

5.10.3 The method

The project looked at three different strands of work which describe the different stakeholder groups as perceived by the project team. These were Community (mainly activists), Public Sector (mainly politicians and planners) and Business (concentrating on house builders and the clean tech industry). The project design involved the following elements:

1. social media audit to find online and offline activity on sustainability and other related topics. This included follow up interviews as well as online search in order to look also for offline networks;

2. Three 'open spaces' format meetings at the start, middle and end of the project to bring together all stakeholder groups to critique and influence both the project process and the shape of the final result;
3. additional meetings with each of the stakeholder groups - either through attendance at one of their meetings or in specific focus groups;
4. online and offline feedback questionnaire;
5. extensive use of social media to capture feedback and progress between the different pathways.

This framework provided a programme of activity. The other important aspect of the work was deciding which messages and issues would be discussed with the pathway groups at each point. The project team had a number of objectives aligned to the discussion in previous chapters. Firstly, the desire to ensure that non-government participants retained power in the process rather than being overwhelmed by the representatives, in line with a co-production process. Secondly, by facilitating conversation and participation in an open and accessible way (Margetts, 2011). This was done by managing the event programme and curating the digital civic space in order to amplify particular messages. This is discussed in more detail in the results section.

5.10.4 Open spaces technology

The community meetings were an essential element of the design of the project and the project team considered it vital that the way in which these were conducted reflected the emphasis on the voices of non-government participants in

the process. In order to address this point the project used the open spaces approach to event design.

Open space technology events assume that the participants will be active in creating the agenda for the event, and involved in delivering. First developed by Howard Owen, it relies on the participants attending having interest in a common theme or purpose and proposing sessions that they will run (Owen, 1997). Only sessions that attract an audience will run, and anyone can apply 'the law of two feet' and leave a session if they are neither learning nor contributing. The onus is very much on the participants to make the event happen. This approach has been adopted by the technology community in the form of Bar Camps, and by social innovators in the form of the CityCamp movement. CityCamp Brighton, for example, was a three-day event that included information sharing, open space discussions of key city issues, and a 'hack day' which connected coders with social activists. Another aspect of these events is the active use of the social media 'back channel' (Chadwick, 2010; McCarthy & Boyd, 2005; Ross & Terras, 2011) to connect the non-present audience to the event and to increase the 'digital footprint' of the event.

This style of event is very different from the kinds of meetings usually held as part of a community engagement programme or by a government organisation keen to discuss an issue with the public. The unpredictability of the outcome and the risk averse nature of the government culture, mean that these government organisations tend towards the controlling processes of agendas and minutes in order to manage their encounters with the public.

Attendee feedback from these open agenda events is usually excellent. I have facilitated a number of them, and attended even more, and the effect on the individual is both energising and empowering. As an attendee one feels valued and feel that one's participation is significant. It is a very different experience from sitting in a large auditorium and passively listening to 'experts'. Taking the example of the CityCamp format,⁴² which is a variant of open spaces, this was designed to bring representatives and citizens together to achieve four things:

1. bring together local government officials, municipal employees, experts, programmers, designers, citizens and journalists to share perspectives and insights about the cities in which they lived;
2. create and maintain patterns for using the web to facilitate local government transparency and effective local governance;
3. foster communities of practice and advocacy on the role of the web, mobile communication, online information, and open data in cities;
4. create outcomes that participants will act upon after the event.

In the cases I have come across, public sector participation is from officers rather than elected representatives, and the effect is to create innovation outside of the system rather than within the policy making process. In the UK, these events

⁴² CityCamp (<http://citycamp.govfresh.com>) (Retrieved 1.04.13) describes itself as "an international unconference series and online community focused on innovation for municipal governments and community organizations". These events are typically 3-day social innovation conferences organised using a variant of the open spaces format.

aspire to be the vanguard of change in the public sector and so find it difficult to operate within those constraints. However, they are another example of where we fail to bring engagement and democracy together. These events can be very successful, but they also focus on the needs and beliefs of an active technological elite and, without the presence of the elected representatives risk, forgetting how unrepresentative participation in these events can be.

The use of open spaces techniques with respect to community meetings is not unique,⁴³ but is unusual in community engagement linked to decision-making. We decided to adopt this approach for this project in order to respond to the fact that the members of the public we contacted through the social media audit process were already collaborating and sharing knowledge. We felt that the open spaces

⁴³ These are two examples of open space approaches used in community engagement:

The Travelling Pantry project, an action research programme from the RSA and others and organised by Tessy Brittain, is designed to create opportunities for communities to start their own projects and is based on open spaces technology:

<http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/newsletter/issue-34-28/fellowship-newsletter/travelling-pantry-workshops>. (Retrieved 1.04.13)

The community engagement work related to Lambeth Council's 'Cooperative Council' project (more information here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/local-government-network/2012/may/18/co-operative-councils-residents-design-public-services>) (Retrieved 1.04.13) also makes extensive use of open spaces approaches. These can be seen on the project blog:

<http://cooperativecounciltoolkit.wordpress.com/category/events/> (Retrieved 1.04.13).

approach was more appropriate for an audience that in many sense did not 'need' public sector involvement in their agenda.

5.10.5 Data collection

Data were collected first as per project two in a social media audit, then through a follow up questionnaire administered to the civic creators found. Physical events were documented either as webcasts or using social reporting techniques, and the project team was also interviewed in order to get their views on the impact of the approach. Finally, the decision-making group of politicians and senior managers was interviewed in order to get their views on the way in which the engagement approach affected the final decision.

5.11 Conclusion

The broad area of enquiry - the potential to use digital civic space to connect informal civic participation with formal deliberation and decision-making - focused on an examination of the independently existing civic activity and then the process and form of how this might be connected into a shared digital civic space.

The research design was grounded in action research practice and, as such, was applied and developed iteratively throughout the three connected projects, each building on the learning of the previous one, in order to address the central area of enquiry focusing on the relationship between informal civic and more formal democratic participation online.

Throughout this process, the challenge for me as researcher was to balance my multiple roles as practitioner, supplier and researcher. The additional ‘publicness’ and participation in the context which I was researching was the result of my decision to document much of my reflection on a blog. This contributed both complexity and benefits to the process. In my final analysis of this challenge I believe that the openness that it enabled was key to my management of my multiple roles, and the associated blurring of boundaries in these relationships.

Chapter 6: Results

6.1 Overview

The fieldwork for this thesis took place over 2.5 years, and the three projects involved working with clients on a commercial basis. The research benefited from contributions from colleagues at Public-i, and the willingness of clients to be involved.

The first project - the Virtual Town Hall – proved to be formative rather than conclusive for the research process. It highlighted a number of flawed assumptions in the original design criteria for a digital civic space and widened the scope of enquiry beyond the prism of local government mediated interventions. It also provided useful insights into the nature of some of the possible affordances for digital civic spaces perceived by government actors, beyond the initial design criteria. Finally, it underlined the importance of being able systematically to find informal civic participation online as a necessary basis for strategic planning.

The second project - Social Media Audits - provided the opportunity to explore digital civic spaces being created by citizens, and to create an evidence base to allow local government to respond to their existence. It provided a better understanding of the broader requirements of digital civic space, and the limitations of sites and spaces that are created and managed wholly by motivated individuals.

The final project – CRIF - was an opportunity to use the concept of digital civic space within an engagement project, and evaluated the ideas outlined in Chapter 3.

6.2 Project one: The Virtual Town Hall

The Virtual Town Hall project design identified the first iteration of the design criteria and Table 6.1 contrasts the final design criteria with those underpinning Project one.

	Criteria	Final version	Project one application
1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen.	The decision to pick Town Hall as a metaphor for public space was deliberate; however, when testing this with civic creators it became clear that they did not perceive the space in this way. During the project the space was described as

			shared rather than public, and this was amended for future projects.
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-productive relationship between citizens and government.	This criterion was not considered at the onset of this project and was added as a result of Project two.
3	A self-defined geography	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the civic creators.	Natural place terms were used by the project team in order to search for civic creators; however, the virtual town hall sites were organised around council boundaries.
4	Open	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and transparency, meaning information available on the space must be available to all participants.	This criterion was introduced after this experiment.
5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and	The Virtual Town Hall sites supported user login, but this feature was not used or tested since the sites were

		policy-making processes.	not launched.
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Table 6.1: Project one design criteria

The data in this section were gathered in two workshops with all the project leaders and participants from the sites, and individual project workshops at each site. This data-gathering phase was planned to be the first in a two-stage data collection process. The findings from this initial work resulted in the project being abandoned before going live, and the second data collection was based on an exit questionnaire and some follow up interviews. Given the small number of participants (8) the interview data are treated as qualitative data. The project was active in four different locations and Table 6 presents the project participants.

Site	Description	Project Participants
Chorley	District in Lancashire	Communication Officer (lead)
Kirklees	Unitary	Head of Democratic Services (lead) plus 2 support staff members
North Lincolnshire	Unitary	Head of Communications, Head of eGovernment, Project Manager
Redbridge	London Borough	Project Manager (Lead)

Table 6.2: List of Virtual Town Hall Councils

In addition to this core group, we worked Devon County Council's Enterprise Architect, who acted as 'critical friend' and advisor to the project, and the development resource provided by Public-i. At the onsite workshops, in addition to the project participants described, there were other participants; they are not

identified since their attendance was a one-off. Essex County Council was originally recruited to participate in the project, but due to internal staff changes withdrew.

Project events consisted of three types:

- planning meetings which involved the author and the specific site participants;
- Virtual Town Hall workshops which brought together participants from all of the project sites with the project team;
- project workshops which included local participants at project sites identified by the project lead.

The project event timeline is presented in Table 6.3

Location	Date	Participants	Event Type
London	27 October 2009	Public-i project team plus council participants	Virtual Town Hall workshop
London	17 December 2009	Public-i project team plus council participants	Virtual Town Hall workshop
Chorley	30 July 2009	Communication Officer, Chorley	Planning meeting
Chorley	23 November 2009	Communication Officer, Chorley, 3 elected representatives (from the 3 main parties), 2 officers from Democratic Services	Workshop
Chorley	20 August 2009	Communication Officer,	Planning

		Chorley,	meeting
North Lincolnshire	27 November 2009	North Lincs. project team, plus 20 participants representing local residents, elected officials and the Police service	Workshop
North Lincolnshire	18 September 2009	North Lincs. Project team, Researcher	Planning meeting
North Lincolnshire	14 August 2009	North Lincs. Project team, Researcher	Planning meeting
Kirklees	17 May 2010	Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees, Researcher	Planning meeting
Kirklees	19 August 2010	Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees, Project Manager, Researcher	Planning meeting
Kirklees	7 September 2010	Representatives from Democratic Services and the IT department	Workshop
Public-i offices	19 September 2010	Project Manager, Redbridge, Researcher, Public- i Development Manager	Planning meeting

Table 6.3: List of Virtual Town Hall events

In parallel with these data collection meetings (all of which were minuted), results were written up in the online research diary; its readers submitted comments either via the blog or in conversation (Ch. 5 section 5.4.1).

Essex was the only county originally involved and some useful points emerged from the workshops held on 24th August 2009 and 9th November 2009. Although Essex subsequently withdrew from the project due to the move to another area of the Head of Communications, who had signed off on the project and championed it, its brief participation highlighted issues related to working in a two tier local government arrangement.⁴⁴ The two workshops held in Essex were with the districts, and with potential community ambassadors (members of the community who it was hoped would be involved in content curation – see section 6.2.6). Although the data gathered in these two workshops are not sufficient evidence to theorise or generalise, they provided some useful observations about how two tier areas operate, which were taken into account in the design of the subsequent projects.

The meeting with the districts discussed the location of decision making, the relationships between the two sets of members, and concerns about what might happen should the two participating organisations disagree about a particular issue. It revealed the competition over citizens' participation time, and also the lack of clarity over responsibility for 'place shaping' within the area.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "Two tier" refers to arrangements in areas where there is both district and county council involvement in the local authority with the result that local services are split between the two tiers. Single tier areas have a single unitary or municipal authority which is responsible for all aspects of local government. Parish level in fact is a third local government tier, but is not described as such..

⁴⁵ Place shaping was the term adopted by local government in the late 1990s, and refers to government policy to create stronger communities by creating a stronger shared sense of place, whose description and definitions is led by the local authority..

The majority of the findings from this project improved understanding of the relationship between local government actors and the informal civic activity that they were aware of within their geographic ambit. This helped to refocus the next project to enable exploration of this relationship from the point of view of local civic content creators.

This section organises the learning from the project into three themes:

- creating a shared space;
- relationship between councils and citizens;
- describing the participants;

When the Virtual Town Hall project was planned all the participants committed to the proposed design principle of the sites being created as ‘shared’ digital civic spaces available equally to citizens, government and elected officials. This principle was outlined in a discussion paper, written to support recruitment at project sites (Howe, 2008), which built on the research carried out for the original Citizenscape project (Howe, 2010). During the course of the planning meetings and workshops that were held, it became clear that the council participants had some reservations about what this meant.

6.2.1 Creating a shared space

The first design criterion describes the requirement for a public and open space and during this project was understood as being a ‘shared’ space. The term ‘shared’ should be seen as synonymous with the term co-production in Chapters 3

and 4, and as part of the design criteria. The term shared was adopted partly to avoid theoretical discussions at project sites, but mainly because it was unclear whether the sites would 'produce' anything; the intention was to gather the relevant actors together without pre-specifying what the outcome(s) could or should be. The expected outcome was a discussion about what might be co-produced. In contrast, in the final project the participants entered into the project with intending to co-produce a defined outcome.

6.2.1.2 Moderation matters

The proposed design for the shared space was for content to be curated rather than moderated. This is in line with the design proposed in Chapter 4 (design criterion 1) and was tested in discussions with the project participants as part of the Virtual Town Hall work. The proposed approach was for members of the community (i.e. local residents) would take on this work as a principal function of the 'community ambassadors' role (the role of the community ambassador) is discussed in more detail in the next section. The theoretical basis for curation rather than moderation is discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.9.2), and was discussed in more practical terms with the project participants (see Table 5). In discussion with project participants at the various workshops it was acknowledged that providing council participants with moderation tools would have given the latter disproportionate power - or at least the appearance of disproportionate power - within the space. This was seen as a useful element of the design since there was a perceived lack of trust between council and citizens at

each of the sites; giving citizens this responsibility was seen as addressing this problem in some way. There were also pragmatic reasons for this choice:

- As discussed earlier, citizens can self-publish online quite easily - there is little incentive for them to republish in a digital civic space that is subject to moderation;
- the burden of moderation which is not scalable, would be unmanageable for the councils.

This design element was heavily debated at the project sites, and all the project participants voiced concerns about how confirmation for the adoption of this approach could be navigated through the decision making process. While some moderation of process might be necessary, the councils were not concerned about this. They were worried about legal responsibility, and how inappropriate content might damage their reputation. Their concerns were exacerbated by the fact that the legal position on content aggregation is unclear in case law since this is a new approach:

Yes, it was difficult to come to a position where the legal team were comfortable with the site being run by the Council and any potential repercussions for comments posted. Also a lack of understanding of how the technology and Social media works among senior staff and Councillors meant it was sometime difficult to show the benefits of what we were doing.
(Communication Officer, Chorley)

Different councils responded in different ways to this issue, but the unease was general among project participants. Those with more experience of online interaction were more sanguine about the ability of the community to moderate

itself, but it was an on-going issue throughout the project. In Redbridge, probably the most digitally progressive council in the project, the representative described the dilemma as follows:

With regards to the Citizenscape approach, I think the biggest hurdle is overcoming a political organisation's fear of ceding control/moderation. For some Councils, the demographic profile of Councillors and senior officers means that there may be a low level of experience of Social media. Old habits, like adherence to the influence of local newspaper headlines may take precedence, despite dwindling readership. It is easier to turn a 'blind eye' to local online activity or community opinion if you do not engage with the medium. The Citizenscape platform's potential as a monitoring tool for aggregated community activity was never fully realised. (Project Manager, Redbridge)

The discussion of these concerns about moderation revealed some of the councils deeper apprehension about how to engage in more open dialogue with the public.

The Kirklees Project Sponsor made this comment on his questionnaire:

There has been some difficulty at an operational / service level where there remains a degree of uncertainty and trepidation around open dialogue with communities in spaces that are not necessarily owned or managed directly by the organisation. Moving away from the concept of traditional consultation to one of open dialogue is a challenge to established practice. The VTH [Virtual Town Hall] concept, in its purest sense, challenges established practice - perhaps not surprising that the two bumped up against each other (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

The Kirklees respondent described the problems related to working effectively in an open environment. Users of the social web are less likely to anticipate that their content will be moderated and are accustomed to being able to communicate freely without this restraint. It was described as difficult to work coproductively with the public if the working style is biased towards consultation and engagement, which give the council more control over the process.

The council officers involved accepted that there was not a case for their moderating community content, which it was felt was a part of community interaction and should be created freely without council intervention. At the same time, they highlighted the risk to the councils' reputation. In mid-2012, the Government Digital Service issued civil service social media guidelines⁴⁶ that encourage civil servants to engage with citizens in those places where they are already present, and provide best practice advice to local government practitioners that support the design criteria in the Citizenscape approach. However, implementation of this principle was not widespread at the time of writing.

The above findings led to the need to explore development of a more co-productive approach in order to balance these tensions; this was included in the later experiments.

6.2.1.2 Branding the space

The question of ownership of the space was discussed in detail in the second Virtual Town Hall workshop and it was concluded that the digital civic space must have independent and neutral branding. Branding in this context refers to the

⁴⁶ The Government Digital Service (GDS) revised the civil service social media guidelines in 2012 to outline a 'lighter touch' approach. This was welcomed by the social media community as a good balance between social media good practice and government requirements:

<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/05/17/cabinet-office-launches-social-media-guidance-for-civil-servants/> (Retrieved 16.02.13).

visual appearance and naming of the space, the colours, fonts and other design elements, to signal either distance from or association with the council site. Neutral branding signals distance from the council, but does not suggest association with any other organisation (use of the colours green, blue, or red colours might violate this principle as they each have strong associations with specific political parties). It is intended to make the content and participants the main focus of the space. This was an important finding which further supported the need for digital civic space not to be controlled by the councils.

None of the participants felt it appropriate for the branding to suggest that the Virtual Town Hall sites were council websites, and all were keen to ensure a sense of community ownership and trust. The benefit of independence from the council was captured in a comment on an exit questionnaire referring to the importance of the space being 'owned' by the community:

Creating a separate environment which can be owned and managed by communities themselves is a key outcome and benefit in taking this approach forward (Enterprise Architect, Devon)

Concern over content quality (which was raised in the workshops) is inherent to the desire for control over the domain. This is discussed in the eParticipation literature in relation to the creation of state controlled spaces for democratic deliberation (Chadwick, 2011).

Neutral branding makes it more feasible to discuss participation from multiple organisations. This suggestion responded to the councils' fears about unmoderated

content being associated with the council brand, and to the project team's lack of conviction that the public would trust the relevant council sufficiently to consider a shared digital civic space. Trust was the main factor. The comment below suggests that perhaps it was the distance from the council rather than the neutral branding that was significant:

I do not necessarily think this is the case - I think as long as it is trusted by the community then it doesn't necessarily need strong branding. However, I would say it is important for it to be distinct from the Council in order to encourage people to take part.(Communication Officer, Chorley)

The project team felt strongly that this kind of civic engagement needs to happen outside of the council web space, but that this creates a tension with the council's attitudes to control and moderation of content.

6.2.2 The relationship between council and citizens

The, perhaps naïve, assumption when planning the project was that participation of the public would be relatively simple to achieve. The participants consulted prior to the launch of the project claimed either to know or assumed that there were citizens in their area who were active online and who would be interested in participating in the planned project. They indicated that an invitation would be all that would be required. However, when we began to invite participation from the public, several problems arose.

The previous section discussed the difficulties involved in resolving the question of moderation. However, it was also difficult to identify community participants. The

observations in this section were gathered from project planning meetings in which I worked with the project teams at each participating site to discuss implementation and design. In these conversations, a number of concerns emerged about the effect that this project might have on the relationship between council and public.

The participants intended the digital space projects to be small scale. However, they were seen as potentially risking disruption to the citizen-council relationship. This was the topic of a great deal of discussion at each of the project planning meetings and onsite workshops. The two Virtual Town Hall workshops discussions were more robust and positive than the response to the project within each organisation, which perhaps reflected the fact that each participant supported the core principles of the project design, even in the face of local difficulties with implementation.

The first concern was about the role of the elected representatives. Since we did not describe this role, there was a risk that the political leadership would object to the additional work on the grounds that it would affect the relationship between citizens and council. For this reason, many of the project participants were keen to 'stay under the radar', but several project participants were uncomfortable with this. This problem remained unresolved at two sites (Chorley and Kirklees). While the issue of democratic deficit was a motivating factor for participation in the project for all the sites, it had not been discussed with the elected members at the councils involved. Interaction on the project had been confined almost entirely to council officers.

The concern about lack of moderation has been discussed, but project sponsors were also concerned about what it would mean to engage in open-ended conversation with the public with no clear path a decision or conclusion. In a consultation context, the risks in many of the interactions between council and public are managed, and the outcome is controlled; this was seen as more difficult on a co-productive relationship. The problem might have been mitigated somewhat had project participants been actively involved in engagement or consultation within their organisations. The general consensus was that it would mean 'selling' the project to new participants that was deemed unrealistic. The question of the need for a more open-ended relationship with the public is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Finally, at some point, all the participants voiced concern over 'making promises that couldn't be kept' or 'unrealistic expectations'. It seemed that there was a belief that if conversation with the public was unbounded, the result would be a flood of demands. This fear had some foundation; for example, one of the councillor involved in the Networked Neighbourhoods research referred to an initial 300 fold increase in his case load, but said that this settled and became manageable once some of these demands were responded to, and he was able to appreciate and benefit from interacting online.

This was related also to the theoretical difficulty of redirecting requests that originated via the Virtual Town Hall to the appropriate operational channels. The project was envisaged as providing a means to discuss decision-making with the

public; however, it was inevitable that practical ‘fix my street’⁴⁷ type issues would emerge in the conversation. This raised the concerns that the council might be overwhelmed by the volume of such demands, and that they would not be able to route them through the organisation.

In all these anxieties, the public was understood as the ‘other’, and seen as promoting an uncontrollable situation. There was an awareness that council staff participants did not feel organisationally prepared to deal with the potential issues. In some ways, this unease was unnecessary - there seemed little risk that a small-scale project would cause such disruption. However, the Virtual Town Hall project challenged conventional thinking. Several participant comments saw the challenge as useful and helpful to inform future work, but the unbounded nature of the work and lack of a clear project plan was disquieting to the councils. This is captured in this comment from an exit questionnaire:

There has been some difficulty at an operational / service level where there remains a degree of uncertainty and trepidation around open dialogue with communities in spaces that are not necessarily owned or managed directly by the organization. Moving away from the concept of traditional consultation to one of open dialogue is a challenge to established practice. The VTH concept, in its purest sense, challenges established practice - perhaps not surprising that the two bumped up against each other (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

⁴⁷ ‘Fix my street’ is a project run by the social innovation organisation MySociety, and offers a way for local communities to report issues and problems in their environment, which then are automatically directed to the relevant part of government: <http://www.fixmystreet.com>.

6.2.2.1 A democratic contract

The proposed design of digital civic space involves participation of local civic content creators. However, as indicated earlier, the nature of this involvement was problematic for project participants. In response to the concerns about moderation, and because it is perceived as best practice to have in place some form of code of conduct, a 'democratic contract' was proposed that would set the tone and standard of behaviour within the Virtual Town Hall space. It was intended to extend the usage policy or 'rules of engagement' agreement in place on most sites that allow user generated content, to include content aggregated from community websites into the Virtual Town Hall. This was seen as responding to council participants' concerns over the inclusion of unmoderated content in the space.

Early in the project (October 2009), the project team decided to adopt the contract used for council officers and elected representatives, for external content providers. This is an important change from the usual eParticipation service, and indicates a reciprocity likely to promote the co-creation we were keen to achieve. Combining internal and external audiences, highlighted that officers could participate as citizens. Use of a single code of conduct created conflict for the officers participating, because it required them to decide how to manage their dual roles of officer and citizen (most participants lived within the local authority boundaries of their employer), particularly for those participants who were in politically restricted posts.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (LGHA 1989) introduced the principle of 'politically restricted posts' (PRPs) whose holders are not allowed to stand for election and also puts some restrictions on non-elected political activity..

The main elements in these contracts were:

- a common code of conduct for language and behaviour – standard content about profanity, need to be constructive, and avoidance of the personal;
- the degree of party politics involvement – the sites would clearly be political, but there were huge concerns over their becoming sites of party political point scoring. This was a legitimate risk and needed to be managed;
- an indication of what the social contract would achieve – what the council would offer in return. Would it allow access to politicians, enable assistance with process, or act to provide more detailed feedback and information?
- a clear process to manage contract breaches;
- due diligence related to intellectual property, copyright, etc.

These democratic contracts were seen as useful for creating a shared understanding between citizen and the local authority and resolving some of the foregoing concerns. They were also considered guidelines for discussions in the space. They were considered important for managing the expectations of participants:

Framing the dialogue is important as is the need to be clear as to expectations both in terms of engagement and what is (is not) achievable. (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

6.2.3 Describing the participants

The project team had envisaged a role for citizens active in creating content, as community managers mediating the relationship between the Virtual Town Hall space and the wider social web. One of the assumptions underpinning the Virtual Town Hall project was that we would work with members of the community and train them to be moderators of Citizenscape sites. Within the project we referred to this role as Community Ambassador. Although the original design called for content curation rather than moderation, this was revised during the planning process for the following reasons:

- issues related to lack of moderation were considerable, and appointing Community Ambassadors was seen as a compromise between the project participants' concerns and citizen involvement;
- the project team believed that a collaborative moderation approach (as discussed in Ch. 5) was appropriate for the project's overall aims and project - it was felt that the communities involved would respond better to moderation from within than moderation government;
- project participants were pragmatic about not having the resources required to undertake this role, and were of the view that if it were included as a requirement of the project this might limit future development.

Like other elements of the Virtual Town Hall project, this was the view of "The Council" rather than the public. The active citizens with whom we spoke did not want to be categorised according to a job description chosen by us, and did not

want to be assigned a 'to-do' list. They were not comfortable with a formal democratic or social contract even when the role was presented as a set of elective and discrete tasks. Figure 3 depicts our interpretation of Community Ambassadors at this stage:

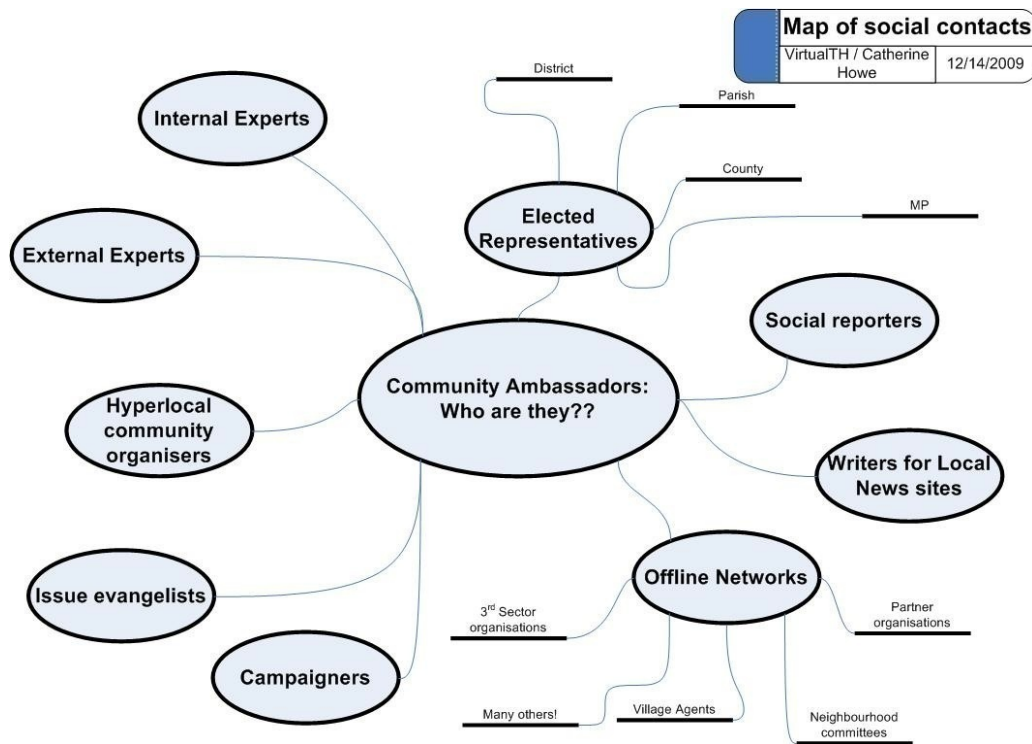


Figure 6.1: Diagram describing Community Ambassadors

The idea of Community Ambassadors was instigated and abandoned during this project. More recent versions of the technology platform have explored a different solution, implementing functionality to allow nomination of trusted individuals whose content from external sites is unmoderated. The second project looked in more detail at civic creators as potential Community Ambassadors.

6.2.3.1 Community ambassadors

In developing Community Ambassador concept we embarked on a process to find online community activity within project sites. All participants were aware of content and content creators in their areas. They believed that engaging with them would be worthwhile, but had not attempted systematically to gather content into one place or make lists of content creators. In order to help the project team locate this content, a questionnaire was created for project participants to complete, to guide them through a search process online. Content was categorised as follows in Figure 4:



Figure 6.2: First description of informal civic activity

The results of these questionnaires proved not very useful and not reflective of the activity that project leads had anticipated. The only participant who produced a usable result had had considerable experience of eParticipation projects. It was clear that the process that this was not providing the information needed to invite members of the community to participate and, more specifically, was not providing the information needed to start aggregating content into digital civic space. The question about what content to include persisted, as this comment from an exit questionnaire makes clear:

I found that there was community content out there but not an awful lot. I think for the Virtual Town Hall idea to work there needs to be more online content than there is here in Chorley. There were one or two sites (particularly the Buckshaw Village forum)⁴⁹ that are excellent examples of community generated content but the rest was mainly Council-led. I think trying to encourage more community forums such as Buckshaw is a starting point that we need to look at in Chorley. I also think community content can create a difficult challenge particularly as it can sometimes be very anti-Council without real foundation. It's definitely a great tool for finding out what's happening in a local area and what the main issues are for a community so harnessed in the right way it's a really useful source of information. (Communication Officer, Chorley)

The issue was not just about finding content; follow up discussion at project planning meetings revealed that the teams were unsure about how to interact with the content that had been found. The following comment is illustrative:

I think the challenge is finding and engaging the "active" communities to generate the content. Social media audits identify the on-line community (to a degree) but the challenge it seems is having the skills, knowledge, resources and organisational buy in to engage with those communities. Such engagement should then facilitate the generation of content. It's not the default that the organisation generates content to facilitate the dialogue or at least get it kick started. It should not be underestimated the effort that needs to be put into off line engagement to facilitate on-line content generation - this has been a real learning point that remains on-going. (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

⁴⁹ Buckshaw village forum (<http://forum.buckshaw.org/forum.php>) is an example of the kind of local community website examined in this thesis. Buckshaw is a small village in Lancashire with a population of approximately 4,000. It is a new-build and was mostly completed in 2006, although neither school buildings nor roads were finished when residents started to move in. The residents complained, organising their objections via the Buckshaw village forum - a hyper local website that was set up by villagers before the construction work was complete. The village forum has 875 members (348 active), 1,217 threads on separate boards and in August 2012 had received 11,722 posts. It is a social, civic and organisational hub managed by the village for the village.

6.2.4 Discussion and conclusions

The Virtual Town Hall Project was designed to be a straightforward route to the creation of digital civic space and, as the above shows, it provided a great deal of useful learning and confirmed ideas, such as the need to engage with people in their own space.

Project participants continued to be supportive of the original design principles, but agreed that significant effort would be needed to achieve internal commitment sufficient for implementing the project:

The concept was spot on, and remains so. The need to use digital spaces to engage with local people and root it back to our democratic processes is very relevant. That said, delivering this concept requires understanding and buy in at a number of levels if it is to be successful. It is not enough to have a handful of evangelists or indeed neglect the wider issue of content generation and the community ambassador role. There are a number of pieces to the VTH jigsaw and they are ALL important to the delivery of the whole concept. (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

The above comment shows that, despite intending the Virtual Town Hall project to be relatively small, it challenged conventional thinking within participating councils, and we found we had underestimated the need to create wider support for the project. My own initial optimism may have underestimated the barriers before us or perhaps simply the change in focus caused by the comprehensive spending review removed institutional focus and raised the level of sensitivity around community engagement to a greater extent than originally envisaged. The Virtual Town Hall project prompted a revaluation of the research approach and the introduction of a number of additional elements in subsequent projects.

The list below summarises the key findings from this project and the issues that were taken forward into subsequent projects:

1. Public space needs to 'feel' public to all participants:

- Despite the project teams' intent to create public spaces, the Virtual Town Halls were not perceived as public space by participants.

2. Local government needs to know more about the citizens they are interacting with:

- The lack of evidence on which councils could rely to describe the nature of online civic activity in their area added to the resistance we encountered in project planning meetings - hyperlocal activity is such a new concept that council's needed evidence of its existence.
- The absence of this evidence stalled project sites around such issues as moderation, for example, and made it difficult to contextualise the problem with respect to real residents.
- As a result the question of 'where to start' became central which led to the development of the social media audit process to respond to this issue.

3. The need for a different kind of relationship with the public:

- The Village Town Hall project was designed from the perspective of the involved councils and based on an eParticipation approach to online engagement. This point was developed subsequently and resulted in the inclusion of Eventually, co-production became a design criterion. Ch. 8 discusses the implications of this with respect to local government policy.

- The community ambassador role was not supported by civic creators and project participants were worried about how this role might interplay with the role of the elected representative. Project participants argued that if a citizen was taking responsibility for all these tasks, this individual should become a candidate for election.

4.eParticipation does not enable us to connect to active citizens via the social web:

- The experience of this project showed a disconnect between the online activity of councils and that of civic creators and active citizens. This project suggested the need to consider other approaches to digital engagement with the public and refocused the research and research approach.

In reflecting on the overall project, I believe, as the main project 'architect', I underestimated the challenge posed by the idea of the Virtual Town Hall to the culture of project partners, and assumed - wrongly - that project leaders would be able to 'sell' the proposition to internal colleagues. In addition, the project design was biased towards the idea that local government would 'solve' the problem of connecting formal and informal behaviours online, and that to make this happen, government needed to create digital civic space. This realisation led to a reconsideration of the framing and design of the subsequent research to include a more central role for the civic creators described in Chapter 3. Finally, I realised that there was a need to provide adequate evidence and understanding of existing informal civic participation, which formed the focus of project two.

6.3 Project Two: Social media audits

The initial 'framing' of this work was premised on local government being the obvious convenor of civic interactions, which was the approach adopted in Project one. However, experience of Project one showed that this framing was not helpful and reflected the bias of the researcher. This bias was based on the assumption that participation in local democracy is driven by local government interventions in the form of organised elections, consultation and engagement activity. However, this ignores civic activity, which might be in the form of agenda setting preceding the more formal mechanisms. My initial bias towards the pre-eminence of government as the convenors of democratic conversation failed to give sufficient weight to the centrality of informal civic participation which might be disconnected from government intervention. As subsequent projects were reconfigured to include all the actors in the civic 'ecosystem' and to give them equal weight, this put a greater emphasis on citizen spaces and citizen participation than in Project one.

The Virtual Town Hall project started from the assumption that councils are the appropriate creators digital civic space. The Social Media Audit project began from the opposite position based on the experience of the Virtual Town Hall project which suggested that the underlying assumption should be exploring whether digital civic spaces were already being created. The first objective of a strategic planning process aimed at interacting online with these sites and their content creators should be to find and learn about them.

Project one helped to develop the design criteria from the point of view of local government participants. In project two the criteria (outlined below in table 6.4) evolved further to better reflect the needs of the civic creators found by the social media audits:

	Criteria	Final version	Project two application
1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen	This project looked at a wider view of what could be considered public space by exploring spaces created by citizens
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-productive relationship between citizen and government.	This criterion was added following the interviews with civic creators and observations of their behaviours online
3	Adopt a self-defined geography	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the civic creators.	Natural place terms were used for the search and proved effective for finding relevant content.
4	Open	The space should support the principles	Most of the sites found through this project were not concerned with policy issues and democratic

		of open government with respect to data, process and transparency, e.g. information available in the space should be available to all participants.	participation or engagement. Content that was focused n these areas was biased strongly towards open government principles which, combined with supporting literature, indicated a need to add this criterion for Project three.
5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.	The social media audits attempted to identify individual civic creators from their self-reported credentials.

Table 6.4: Project two design criteria

The five research sites in the second project were recruited commercially by Public-i; all the clients involved were keen to get an overview of the civic social media activity in their areas.. The possibility of creating digital civic space was discussed with participants at each site (with reference to the Virtual Town Hall work). The only one that had developed at the time of writing is the CRIF project in Cambridgeshire which was the basis for project three. Each audit resulted in a data spread-sheet and a research report that included data analysis and selected

case studies (discussed later in this section). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with project leads; the results are included later in this chapter

The objective of the Social Media Audit project was to find civic websites in the area and to identify civic creators with the potential to become content architects of digital civic space. The social media audit provided a way of finding active community participants already engaged in local issues and open to a new route to community engagement, based on capabilities and assets rather than needs assessment (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996).

6.3.1 Research sites

The research compared five areas (listed in table 6.5 in the order that the work was carried out):

Site	Data	Description	Project Sponsor
West Sussex County Council	January 2011	Project funded by the Customer Insight team reporting to the Senior Management Team.	Head of Customer Insight
CRIF (Cambridgeshire County)	March 2011	Project funded by Cambridgeshire Horizons, a partnership organisation in Cambridgeshire responsible for various sustainable infrastructure projects across the	CRIF Project manager (see Project three)

		county. In this project, I use county council statistics.	
East Sussex County Council	May 2011	Project funded by the Communications department, reporting to the Assistant Chief Executive	Head of Communications, Community Engagement team
Wolverhampton City Council	June 2011	Project initiated by the Chief Executive and project managed by the Communications Department.	Head of Communications
Cumbria County Council & Cumbria Police Force	July 2011	project initiated by the Deputy Chief Constable of Cumbria Police who invited the County Council to join the project.	Head of Communications, Chief Constable

Table 6.5: List of Social media Audit Sites

In the case of the East Sussex, Wolverhampton and Cumbria audits, the local police force co-funded the work. In the case of Cumbria, the Cumbria Police Force was the lead client.

Data were collected and analysed from all five project sites, between January and July 2011. With the exception of the CRIF team (described in more detail in Project three), the primary motivation of all the participants was to discover what, if any, civic social media activity could be found in their area.

While the research was externally focused, it should be noted that all the sites were making some use of social media, although for communication rather than

community engagement work. However, the project teams had some understanding of the principles of social media although mostly had not exploited it for more open or conversational relationships with the public. An exception was Wolverhampton, which had a park keeper who was very active and influential in the online community. However, his activity was outside the purview of our client in the Communications team, who was unaware of it. This exception may not be unusual; 'official' use of social media in councils often begins in a single department – frequently the Communications Department – and grows. My experience of working with councils shows that much of this activity is unsanctioned social media use before implementation of an official strategy. This exemplifies the potential disruptive effect of technologies that allow officers to advance projects bypassing formal project signing off processes.

In both informal and formal projects there is a point when more appropriate and conversational style is adopted. For example, when the council accepts the culture of the social web, wider organisational change is required to avoid conflicts.

While all the sites were keen to get snapshots of local online civic activity, secondary motivations for commissioning this work varied. In East Sussex and Cumbria, the secondary motivation was to inform strategies for meeting and interacting with civic creators. In West Sussex, the project sponsor was interested in how local social media activity could be considered part of the council's wider customer insight work. In some cases the project sponsor was interested in a specific topic. West Sussex also wanted more time spent on researching youth participation online and East Sussex was interested in possible conversations

about recent cuts, in the local digital civic space. The work in Cambridgeshire, as explained later, focused on groups interested in a range of environmental topics.

6.3.2 Initial expectations

Since the social media audit was aimed at showing how much civic content was being created online, it was helpful to consider social media take-up in each location in order to formulate a working assumption about the volume of content that might be found. This was important because of the experimental nature of the work and the open-ended nature of the process of online search.

The first audit was carried out in West Sussex and the approach taken here was different to that taken with the other four sites (see section 6.3.4.2 for discussion of this). In West Sussex, data were searched for, qualified and categorised on a rolling basis using an evolving set of search terms and a variety of search techniques. At the end of the process and completion of the audit, it was concluded that the approach was flawed - mainly because it was difficult to standardise and replicate it. There were no clear divides between iterations of the search, and no obvious end to the search, which made it a difficult process to manage. In some ways, it resembled the snowballing technique in social network analysis (Scott, 2005; Wasserman & Faust, 2005), but lacked a clearly defined limit to the number of iterations.

A more structured approach was adopted for subsequent audits, which produced a fixed set of data which were then categorised and coded. This approach was more

manageable and ran less risk of bias associated with the person conducting the search. However, at the same time it risked ‘missing’ valuable content because it was confined by the original search terms.

In order to ‘bound’ the research, the research team decided a threshold number of sites for each audit; this meant that, in some cases, the number of search terms was expanded or refined. The data described in Chapter 2 indicated that we would find a fraction of the active online population were content creators. Based on estimates of how many citizens are active, politically or generally, within civil society (see Ch. 2), it was reasonable to assume that the number of civic content creators in an area would be low. The minimum targets set for county and urban councils on the search process were based on these estimates and are presented in Table 6.6

Data set candidate sites	Target. 2000
Number of sites following manual data qualification	>150
Number of named civic creators / individual sites found	25-50

Table 6.6: Social media Audit search size

Initial targets were rather arbitrary and did not reflect the size of the geographic area or the population being searched. Based on experience in other areas, and the results in the literature (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a; Kavanaugh et al., 2005), creation of hyperlocal sites was unlikely to be a widespread activity. The objective

of the social media audit was to identify 'enough' activity to justify further experimentation and exploration from the point of view of the local government (or police) client, rather than to create a picture of all the activity in the area. Estimates were adjusted downwards in areas that were smaller than a town or had problems with broadband coverage. In most cases these target numbers were used to gauge the completeness of the search

Thus, the social media audit is not aimed at providing a comprehensive picture of all the activity in a specific area. This was another reason for abandoning the very open method used in the first audit and focus on conducting formative research which could provide a starting point for online engagement work by the client. The adoption of a method that could work in 'Internet time' (Karpf, 2012) provided the research sponsors with adequate evidence and direction to start formulating a strategy that would respond to the rapidly changing online activity.

The social media audit process involved data collection (as described in Ch. 5) and two further stages involving case analysis and interviews with civic content creators in order to understand motivations and attitudes within this group. The research team at Public-i conducted some of the interviews and conducted the data qualification work.

6.3.3 Categorisation of data

In order to analyse activity at research sites, the content found was categorised as part of the manual data qualification process. The categorisation (outlined in table

6.7) was devised in order to include the spread of content types found in the exploratory audits.

Site type	Description
Individual	Blogs, websites and Twitter feeds created by one person which reflect their opinions.
Media (added in 3rd audit)	Websites generating news, features and sports coverage for commercial purposes - in particular, creating content to attract readers in order to sell advertising.
Political	Sites which are party affiliated and are either created by a political party, a candidate or an elected politician.
Non-social / Traditional	Traditional websites that represent community activity, but do not exploit social tools such as discussion boards, Twitter or general user generated content.
Community of interest	Sites focused on a specific issue or topic, run by clubs (e.g. local sports clubs) or third sector organisations (e.g. AgeUK) and included here if they meet the criterion of place or topic.
Campaigns	Social media sites to mount specific campaigns.
Hyperlocal	Websites set-up and run by members of the community to connect with and discuss local issues. They use social media tools and are probably the clearest expression of an “I want to talk to my community” intent.
Facebook	Facebook is a separate environment and we report on groups and pages as a separate category.

Table 6.7: Social media Audit Categorisation

YouTube and Twitter were categories in the first audit in this project, but were then excluded because content description categories were more meaningful. The Facebook category was retained because we found substantial similarities among sites in terms of how Facebook sites were being used which made the platform a useful descriptor of the nature of the site. We added a Media category to highlight local media content from ‘traditional’ providers. All of these categories were created to help shape the operational response of the project sponsor to this content, rather than being a descriptive or analytical process.

6.3.4 Quantitative results

This section provides an overview of the content found through the Social Media Audit. Civic content was found at each of the research sites as shown in Table 6.8 and this is the basis for the conclusion that it is possible to consistently find civic content online. It is:

Site	Date of Audit	Count of sites found
East Sussex County Council	April 2011	229
West Sussex County Council	December 2010	333
Wolverhampton City Council	July 2011	153
Cumbria County Council	September 2011	157
Cambridgeshire County Council	March 2011	325

Table 6.8: Social media audit results

Figure 6.3 provides a chart of the different types of content found at each sites.

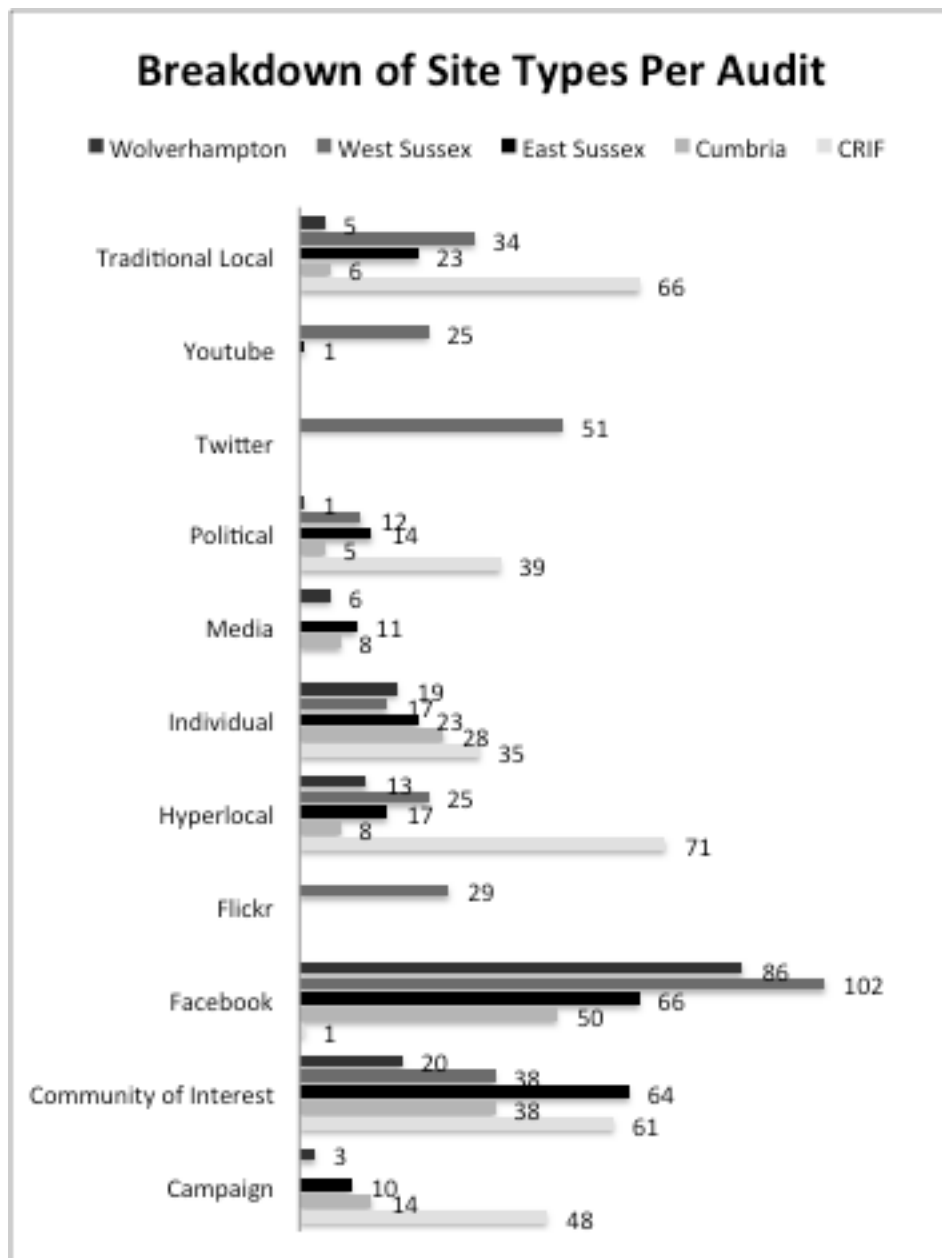


Figure 6.3: Count of type for each audit

The categorisation method varied among audits, which accounts for some of the differences in results:

- Apart from the West Sussex audit, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter were not coded as separate categories but were coded thematically. This provided a more informative dataset; it was decided that platform choice was of less interest than the content being created;

- Facebook sites were categorised by platform (see section 6.3.4);
- The high number of Facebook sites in West Sussex is likely a result of the unbounded nature of the search when it was expanded from the initial search set rather than being constrained by the initial set of search terms.

6.3.4.1 Adjustment by population

A simple count does not take account of differences in two important variables: population size and number of search terms used to create the initial data set. Figure 6.4 assumes that one person is responsible for each of the civic websites found (in reality it could be 2 or 3 people) and shows then the distribution of civic sites per thousand population:

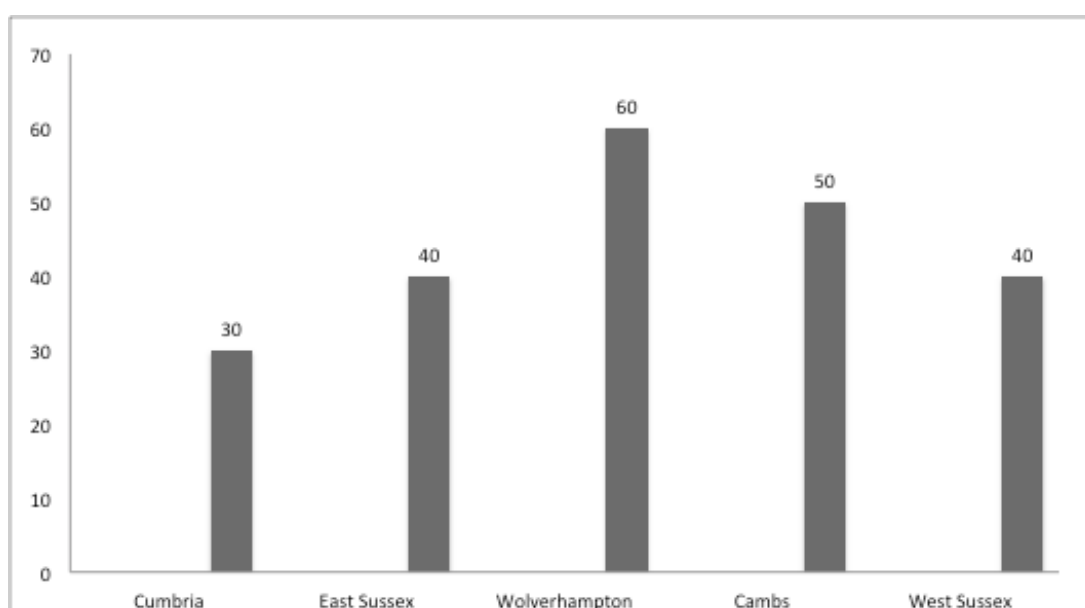


Figure 6.4: Site / number of civic creators per thousand of population

The average for all the sites is 0.005%, or 5 per 1000 population.

OFCOM and Oxford Internet Institute data discussed in Chapter 1 (section 1.1) show that not everyone is online, and that not everyone who is online creates content. It is more helpful to look at civic activity as a percentage of total number of online content creators rather than a percentage of the whole population. This was calculated by factoring the population into the same age groups as in the 2009 Oxford Institute Internet Survey (Dutton et al., 2009) with respect to content creation activities online, in order to estimate the number of content creators in each area.

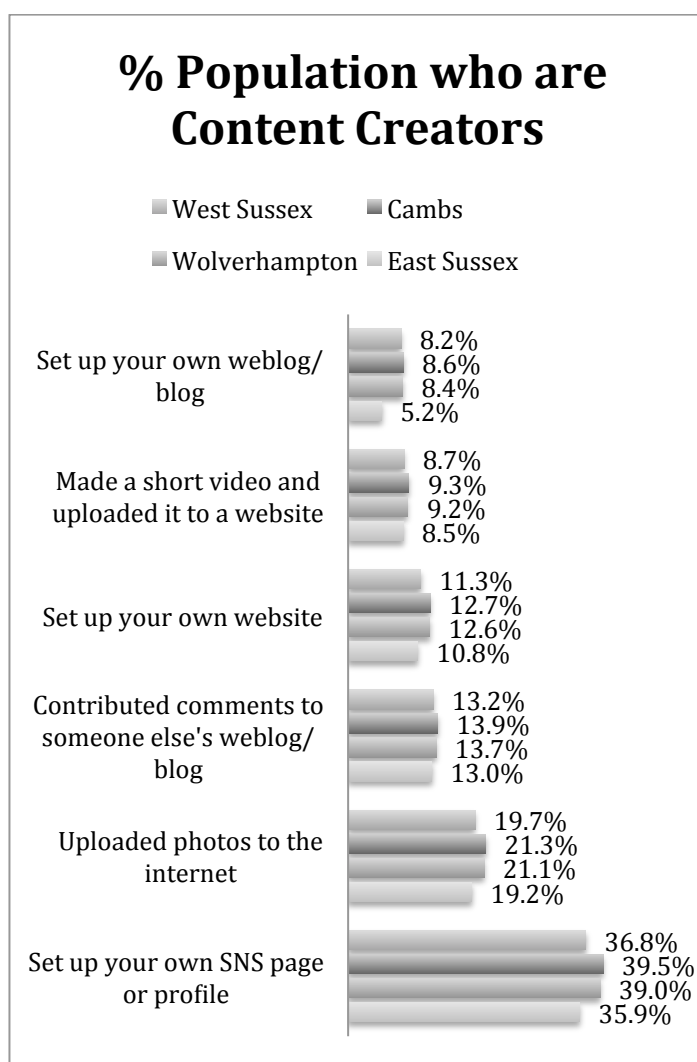


Figure 6.5: Percentage of the population likely to be content creators

The Hansard Audit of Political Engagement 2011 report provides evidence that only 140 per 1,000 (14%) of the population are active in their local communities (“Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report,” 2011) in a civic context; thus, civic creators might be at the intersection between people keen to be active in their local community and people interested in creating a website to facilitate community activity. Given the lax criteria categorisation as a civic creator (e.g. having a Facebook page), the Hansard research suggests that these results might under-count ‘civic sites’– as the number of sites is surprisingly small when compared to Hansard’s measure of civic participation. This may be an effect of the exploratory nature of the search process, which provides a sample rather than being designed to provide a comprehensive overview of informal civic content in the searched areas. It merely checks whether each site reach the agreed threshold (see section 6.3.2).

No assumptions are made the reach of these sites. Reach refers to the number of people who access as opposed to create content, and is an important measure of the centrality of a site or individual in the local civic online network. The only category where reach is investigated is Facebook where it is possible to see the number of ‘likes’ or ‘members’ online. Reach is difficult to judge without a clear view of the potential audience of a civic website. For example, a reach of 300 is unimpressive in a conurbation with 10,000 population, but would be considered good for a website related to a village with a population of 1,500. Individual connectors or nodes in a local network are an indication of the network’s cohesion and effectiveness (see section 6.3.5).

6.3.4.2 Adjustment by number of search terms

Figure 6.6 presents the numbers of search terms used for each audit and compares them to the number of sites found.

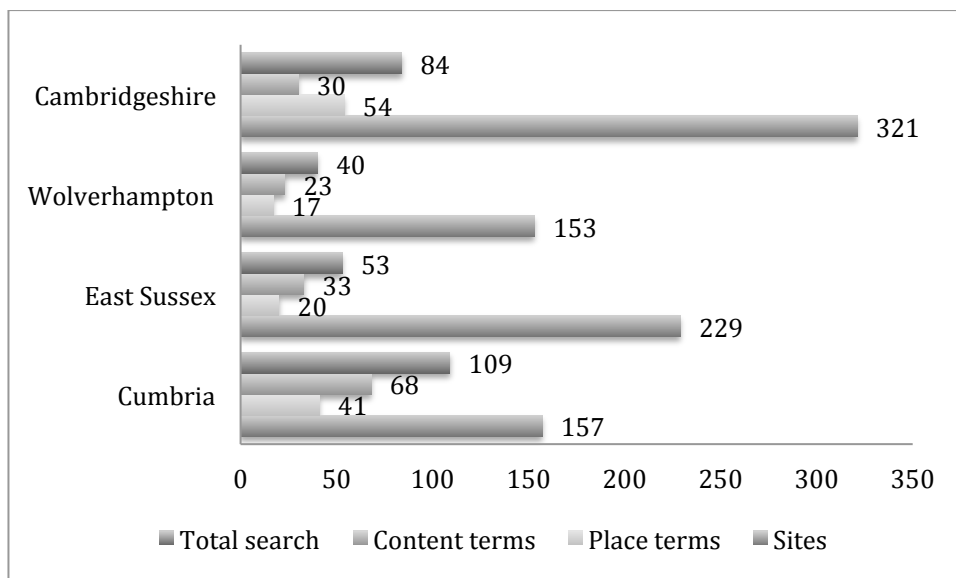


Figure 6.6: Ratio of search terms to sites found

(Note that the West Sussex Audit did not use pre-defined search terms.)

There is no correlation between the number of search terms and the number of sites found; the audit using the largest number of search terms (Cumbria 109) yielded the smallest number of qualifying sites (157). This difference is not explained by population size. Table 6.9 shows that Cumbria has a similar sized population to East Sussex and a larger one than Wolverhampton.

Research Site	Population
Cambridgeshire	1,848,846
Cumbria	1,483,050
East Sussex	1,546,566
West Sussex	2,399,103
Wolverhampton	718,062

Table 6.9: Population Sizes

The data cannot be immediately explained. Future research could investigate the demographics of different areas, and the effects of types of employment and being an urban as opposed to a rural environment. It might also be relevant to consider lifestyle factors such as commuting by public transport, which might offer more opportunities to use online services.

There are three other differences related to the samples:

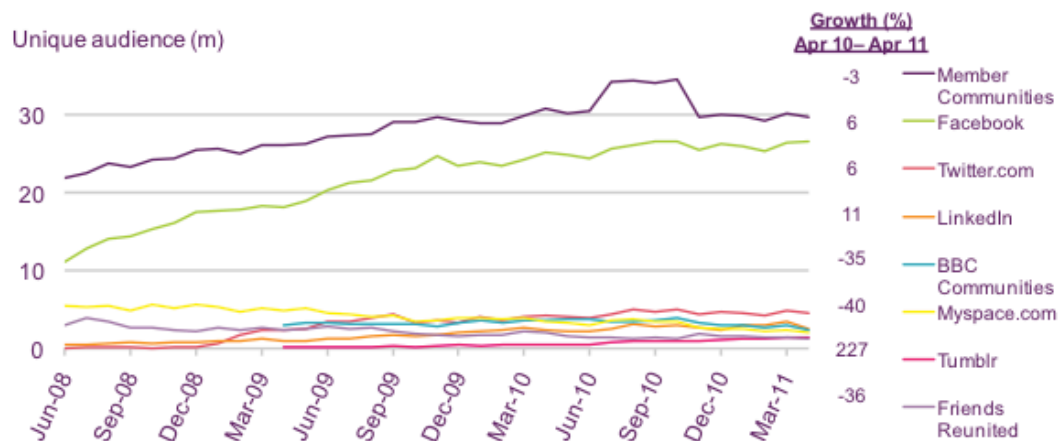
- 1.the West Sussex audit used an exploratory rather than the more systematic process applied to the other four counties. The method was adjusted to respond to concerns that the results would be overly dependent on the point of entry to start the exploration. The unbounded research approach was difficult to manage in terms of resources and time commitment, and the social media audit process that evolved made it possible to manage time more effectively;
- 2.the data sets were created at slightly different times and so the searches were conducted against a different results context (search that found the top 20 results in terms of Google rankings within one period might not be the same results as returned at another point in time);

3. Different people checked the data during the period of the research. Data quality was managed by continuous sampling by an experienced member of the team, and final checking of the final data by the researcher. The researcher is reasonably confident that all the sites included are valid,
4. although there is a risk that some sites were deleted from the data set before final review and qualification.

6.3.4.3 Facebook

The decision to code Facebook sites separately responded to the extent of the activity due to the dominance of Facebook in the social networking space in the UK. OFCOM (OFCEM 2012) reports that 64% of adults with a broadband Internet connection have used a social networking site, and information on usage released by Facebook suggests that a significant proportion of these users are active on Facebook. Figure 6.7 depicts national statistics for levels of activity on Facebook and shows that it far exceeds any other single social networking site:

Figure 4.35 Unique audience of selected social networking sites



Source: UKOM/Nielsen

Note: Home and work panel, applications included. 'Member communities' is the UKOM category that primarily consists of social networking sites. "Unique audience" = the total number of unique persons who have visited a website or used an application at least once in the specified reporting period. Persons visiting the same website or using the same application more than one time in the reporting period are only counted once.

Figure 6.7: OFCOM social networking data

("Communications Market Report 2012," 2012)

Based on these numbers, it would seem we did not find a high enough percentage of Facebook sites, although this might be explained by the fact that the language on Facebook may be more informal and not identified by our search terms. Also, Facebook is a predominantly social environment and we would not expect to find much civic content. One observation not followed up, but noted by the data qualification team was the number of Facebook pages that were found but then discarded - usually because they did not meet the criterion 'persistence'.

Table 6.8 presents the distribution of sites by type.

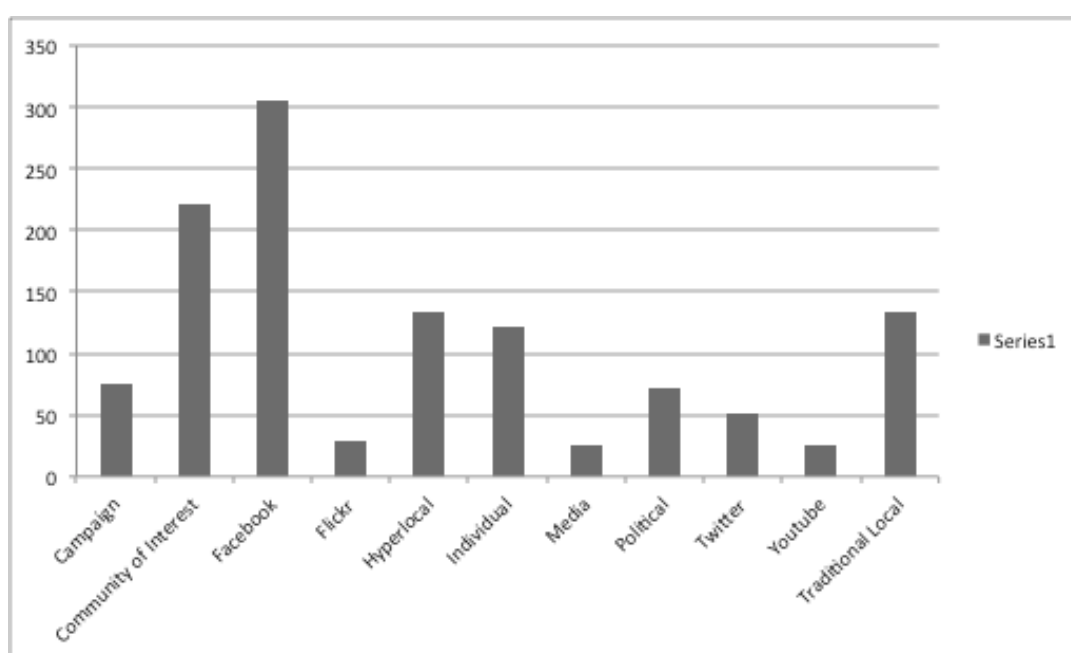


Figure 6.8: Breakdown of types of sites

As mentioned above, Facebook was the category where it was relatively straightforward to gauge the reach of the site based on page 'likes'.

6.3.5 Civic creators

Chapter 3 discussed the argument that to investigate online space it is necessary to consider the *people* who are creating the content and using the space, as well as the *code* that describes and scopes it. Accordingly, the behaviours of content creators were crucial for developing the design criteria. The literature outlined in Chapter 3 was echoed in the fieldwork of the Virtual Town Hall project which highlighted the need to understand more about the individuals who are active online in a civic capacity.

Civic creators are a small but important group with respect to the creation of digital civic space. According to the Oxford Internet Studies (Dutton & Blank, 2011) and other sources (Li & Bernoff, 2008; *Social Networking: A quantitative and Qualitative research report inot attitudes, behvaiours and use*, 2008), a small percentage of people are responsible for creating the majority of the content on the social web.. In looking at civic creators, a minority within that minority of content creators, it is possible to that that categorisation can be broken down into smaller groupings

This research – directly or indirectly - examined 1,193 websites that met the criteria described in Chapter five (section 5.10). The range of content and activity is vast. At the start of the process we focused on finding content. As we observed more sites, we put greater emphasis on finding the key individuals involved in creating the sites, and further developed the criterion of significance outlined in the design and method sections (Ch. 4 section 4.6.1, Ch. 5 section 5.10.2). In order to understand these individuals better, the Cambridgeshire and Cumbria audits included a questionnaire for Civic Creators. The response rate was not large, but responses received identified some interesting issues, which could be investigated in future research. In addition to this interviews were conducted in Cambridgeshire (10) and Cumbria (5).

Average age of questionnaire respondents was 55 and the gender balance was fairly even - 7 women and 8 men. Three other respondents asked for their not to have their responses included in this research. The majority of respondents were employed (9), four were retired, and one described herself as a 'stay at home

mum'. One did not answer the related question. Nine of the respondents had a postgraduate degree, and four had a bachelor's degree which highlights some of the concerns discussed in Chapter 6, section 6.3.6 with respect to digital exclusion.

Interviews were only possible in the areas where the client agreed to support further research beyond the social media audit process. The interviews explored civic creators' motivations for creating their sites and the content, and their attitude to the local authority and the local democratic process.

Table 6.10 presents an overview of the interviews carried out:

Site	Number of Interviews
East Sussex County Council	No formal interviews although the researcher met one of the administrators of the Hoathly Hub for an informal discussion
West Sussex County Council	No interviews
Wolverhampton	No formal interviews although the research met the creators of WV11
Cumbria	5 Interviews
Cambridgeshire	7 interviews

Table 6.10: Social media audit interview breakdown

While the sample within this research may not be representative of the larger group of civic creators, it reflects a range of the views of the individuals creating the digital narrative and footprint of their communities. There were a number of different motivations for the activity, but also some common themes such as a desire to do something for the community, a personal interest in the process, or

keenness to learn new skills. One respondent described how she started blogging for personal reasons and became more politically interested over time:

I blog partially for myself: to keep my brain active. Initially my content was really about being a stay at home mum, but now I do tend to include politics because the current state of affairs makes me very angry, and as I live in a totally Conservative area, where my vote is worth nothing, I feel very disenfranchised by the current electoral system. (Civic Creator from Cambridgeshire)

Others were more oriented towards their local community and referred to creating a useful resource for visitors or “enrich[ing] the lives of individuals within our [i.e. her] community”. Some interviewees were local business owners who used social media commercially, but with civic participation as a positive by-product of their mainstream activity:

My business *Fit to Print* takes clients from all over the world. But since using Twitter I have built up a local following which is different and more vibrant than any bunch of people I ever met at, say Chamber of Commerce networking events. (Local Business Owner, Cumbria)

One of the most striking and frequently repeated comments from people we spoke to, across audits, related to the extent to which they rejected the idea that their work was related to local politics:

“I do a lot of what politicians do without being political” (Cumbria)

While participants were clearly interested in local affairs and in local decision-making, no one expressed a desire to become more involved in local democracy. When asked if they thought that their site could contribute to local decision

making, most agreed,⁵⁰ but said that political engagement was a by-product and not a motivation for them and they still considered offline the major channel of engagement. One respondent noted that democracy was essential for complex decision-making, but that people needed clear and open information in order to make informed choices - they felt that the current style of communication from government was not sufficiently transparent.

Each of the participants was asked about the reach of their sites and although some were vague about numbers they all knew that their sites were read and used by their communities because they received sporadic feedback (and occasional requests to remove specific photos). The numbers discussed ranged from 60-150. It was noted that not all of these are local people –in some cases they included former residents or people with family in the area.

Target audiences in some cases were national and aimed at special interests; local audiences were specific villages or towns, or the 'local town' or 'surrounding villages'. For campaign focused respondents their intended outcomes were informing people about their issue and getting more people involved. In contrast, a general blogger confessed that he enjoyed having the freedom to let off steam. Three of the Cambridgeshire respondents referred to lack of access to decision makers as a barrier to achieving their campaigning outcomes, and two talked about lack of community interest (in the specific topic). Two respondents mentioned lack of resources and only one considered there were no barriers.

⁵⁰ This question was included in the Cambridgeshire questionnaire, and was included in the interviews.

The majority of these respondents described themselves as local residents and bloggers (6) with slightly fewer describing themselves as citizens (5) and four describing themselves as community members or campaigners. One added at the end of the survey that “I would say I am much more of a networker than a content generator at the moment” which is an interesting acknowledgement of the connecting role that civic creators can play in their communities.

If these activities are to be linked to decision making, it would be helpful to examine the typology of local digital participants as individuals and in terms of their technical skills, order to create ‘best fit’ strategy solutions which not only create better relationships but also respond to their technology preferences (e.g. if the civic creator is active on Facebook then engage with them there). There are active individuals in most communities. It could be argued that the persistent reach and connectivity of the social web will enable these individuals to play a pivotal role in their communities’ digital spaces.

Civic creators are inextricably linked to the sites they create. The next sections provide some examples of these sites to show the variety of content and content creators found. The data show that motivations fall into three categories which could be informative for planning digital civic space:

- community benefit;
- personal benefit;
- personal satisfaction.

The last is distinct from the other two in that the role of the audience seems to be secondary. I would consider that my blog falls into this category – although I welcome and appreciate my audience the primary purpose of the blog was to help organize my thoughts in relation to the research. All the sites fall into the category of informal civic participation; however, this additional categorisation does provides some further differentiation.

Community benefit examples:

Tables 6.9-6.15 present examples of community benefit.

Example 1: WV11

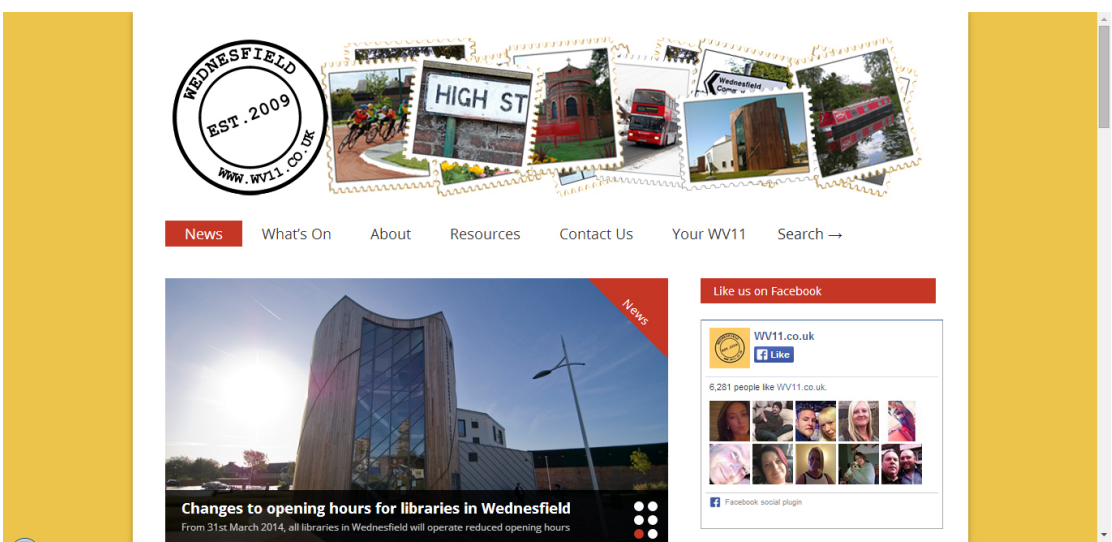


Figure 6.9: WV11

Site:	http://www.wv11.co.uk (last accessed 1.04.13) plus active Facebook and Twitter accounts
Identity provenance	Both main authors named and contactable via the site
Persistence	Site has been operational and regularly updated since 2009

Responsiveness	Comments encouraged and there is also regular interaction on the Facebook and Twitter accounts
Constructiveness	Site focuses on community news and has a clearly stated objective to help the community get the most out of living in WV11

Table 6.11: Overview of WV11

WV11 is an award-winning⁵¹ hyperlocal website run by two volunteers who also work with Podnosh⁵² to develop other hyperlocal sites. It can be considered a hyperlocal news site and part of the movement described in Ch 3, section 3.7. It covers everything that takes place within a particular postcode area in Wolverhampton. WV11 is a website based on an administrative description - a postcode - and the energy and efforts of the people involved have created a community around it. One of the findings from the Wolverhampton social media audit was lack of civic conversation around the idea of 'Wolverhampton'. The city tends to see itself as a series of smaller communities such as WV11, or sees itself as affiliated to the Black Country. The success (measured by readership and awards) of WV11, shows a very different approach to the description of place than was identified by the overall audit process.

⁵¹ Details of the awards can be found at: <http://www.wv11.co.uk/about/> (retrieved 2.01.13).

⁵² Podnosh (<http://www.podnosh.com>) is a small business that works with local communities to help increase social media skills.

Example 2: Richard Taylor

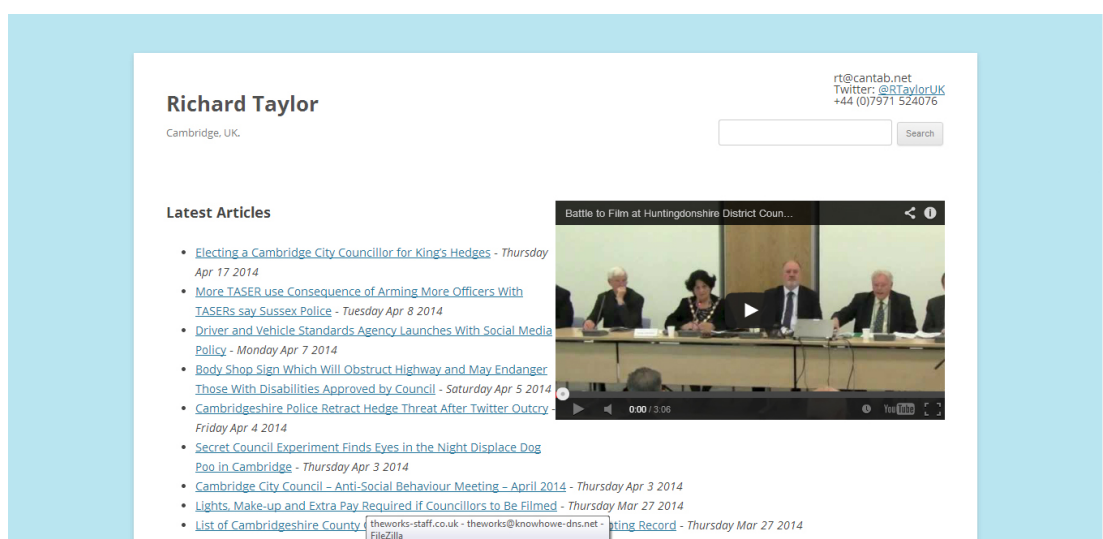


Figure 6.10: Richard Talyor

Site:	http://www.rttaylor.co.uk (last accessed 1.04.13)
Identity or provenance	Clear contact details provided
Persistence	Richard Taylor has been active on this site for some time and blogs multiple times in a week
Responsiveness	Many blog posts have comments and responses and Richard Taylor is also very active on Twitter to communicate with his audience
Constructiveness	Taylor's primary content is local politics in Cambridge

Table 6.12: Overview of Richard Taylor

Richard Taylor is an active online and offline campaigner who is prepared to attend formal meetings and to live-tweet and then blog about them. He is open on his website about his motivations and interests and is a supporter of and activist

for MySociety⁵³ where he worked on whatdotheyknow.com. Taylor's the energy and commitment including time commitment, are striking.

Example 3: The Anke

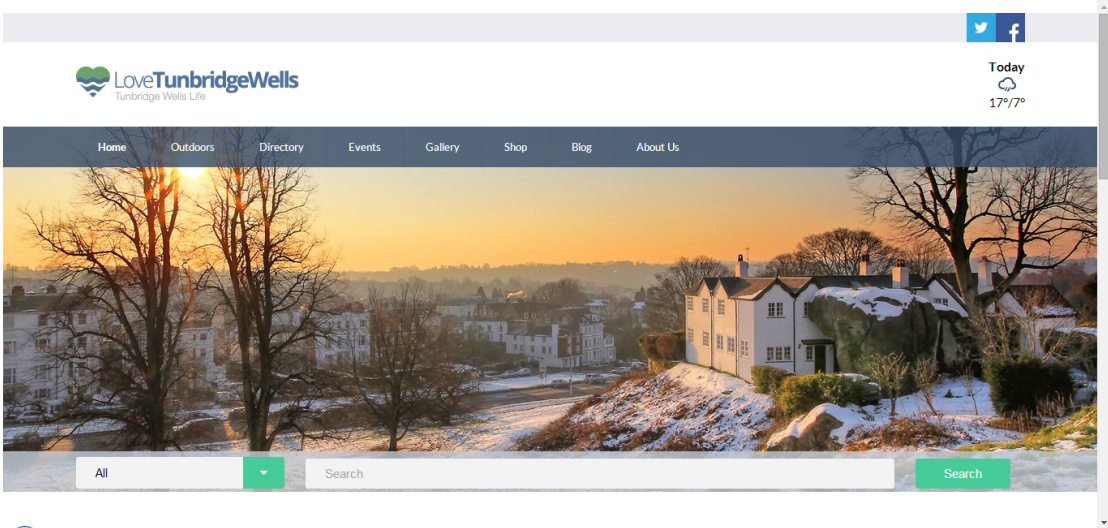


Figure 6.11: the Anke

Site:	http://anke.blogs.com/ (last accessed 1.04.13)
Identity or provenance	The author (<i>Christopher Cassidy</i>) uses his @AnkeTW pseudonym in the main; he is clearly named on the site and is contactable
Persistence	The site has been regularly updated since 2005
Responsiveness	Comments are responded to, and in the previous year or so the site had become more of a conversation with its readership as opposed to personal musings
Constructiveness	The site covers a wide range of local issues and events which would have 'slipped beneath the radar' of traditional local media.

Table 6.13: Overview of The Anke

⁵³ MySociety (<http://www.mysociety.org>) is a UK based charity which creates technology solutions to address social issues.

The Anke has been reporting on local news in Royal Tunbridge Wells since 2005 and site pops show it reports all major events in the town.

The Tunbridge Wells example demonstrates that civic creators may not be activists or frame themselves as 'hyperlocal journalists'. They may, as is the case with the Anke, just enjoy writing about the place where they live, resulting in a valuable resource in the digital civic space.

Example 4: Hoathly Hub



Figure 6.12: Hoathly Hub

Site:	http://www.hoathlyhub.info (last accessed 1.04.13)
Identity or provenance	There are contact details on the site (though not named individuals) and also phone numbers for the parish council which is the organiser of the site
Persistence	The site has been regularly updated for some years

Responsiveness	The discussion board is active with multiple posters on active threads
Constructiveness	The site provides information about local events and local politics

Table 6.14: Overview of Hoathly hub

The Hoathly Hub in West Sussex is a brilliant example of what a parish council can achieve. It is not a static website, but is a hub for all kinds of activities in the village. It does not use up-to-date technology or have a slick design, but it appears to be a well-used site with regular updates and interactions. The site includes an events calendar and a discussion board, and enables access to a local directory of services, activities and events. The hub began to use Twitter in January 2011. The main site is ‘traditional’ and does not use social media.

Personal benefit examples:

Tables 6.13 and 6.14 present examples of sites which are created for personal benefit

Example 1: The Worthing Page

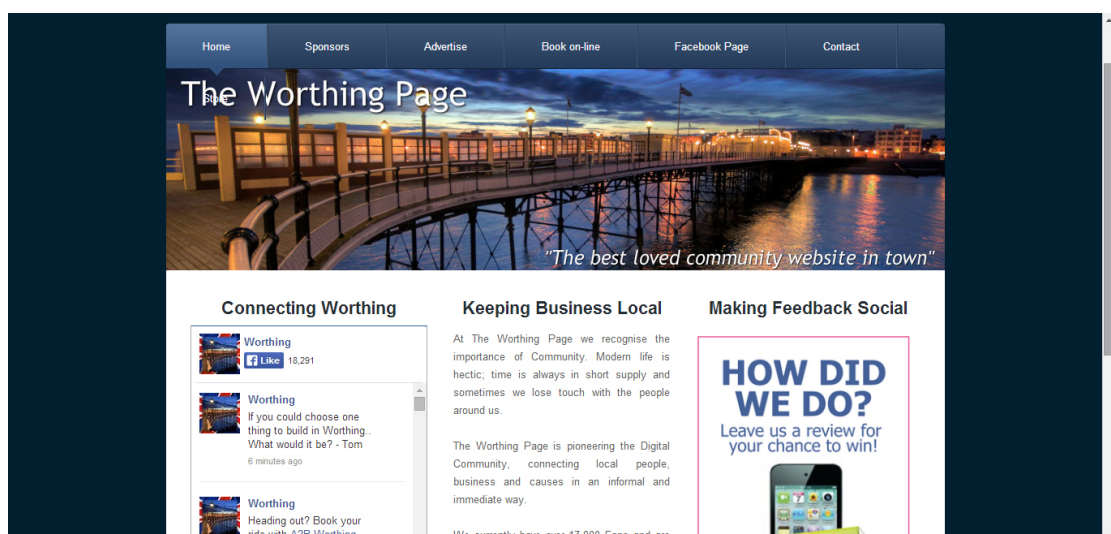


Figure 6.13: The Worthing Page

Site:	http://www.theworthingpage.co.uk (last accessed 1.04.13) / http://www.facebook.com/worthingtown
Identity or provenance	The owner Ed Crough is easily contactable via the website and is visible and active on the Facebook page
Persistence	The page has been regularly updated since it was created in 2010
Responsiveness	The page shows high volumes of interaction with users
Constructiveness	While the purpose is commercial the page also includes civic information and comment and the overall tone is community focused

Table 6.15: Overview of the Worthing Page

The Worthing Facebook page is an example of what a hyperlocal entrepreneur can achieve. My colleague Andrew Brightwell interviewed its founder, Ed Crough, who has been running The Worthing Page for more than three years in 2011. At the time of the interview, the page had over 10,000 ‘likes’ (that number is over 12,000 at time of writing).

Crough told Brightwell that the page started as a forum outside of Facebook and then became integrated within the Facebook platform. The standalone forum did not achieve traction, but the Facebook page has grown steadily in popularity. Crough makes money from the page not by selling advertising, but by selling sponsorship to local businesses, and sees this as a more ‘palatable’ form of relationship with local businesses – and it would also a fruitful one. Crough experiences some difficulties in working within the prescriptive Facebook environment; because of the dominance of the platform in terms of Social media

sites he considers these difficulties an acceptable cost of doing business on Facebook:

Every second person that you bump into is on [Facebook] and my experience with The Worthing Page, which was first on an old-fashioned bulletin board website, proved that if you want something to grow and if you want to have that reach it's got to be in a place that people do not have to remember to go on..... There have been a number of other websites which I have seen that have been probably better. They have probably been better looking than The Worthing Page – and maybe had more money invested to make them to look pretty, but you have got to remember to go on 'www.separate-website.com'. People are not going to see it as part of that drip feed that Facebook gives you.

Crough is clear that what he is doing is not journalism - though he is keen to correct factual inaccuracies when the conversation on the page strays towards civic issues. This is a very different model to the usual concept of hyperlocal site, however, it is serving the local community and meets the criterion of persistence, and has relevant content.

Example 2: Southwater Forum



Introductions				
Forums		Topics	Replies	Last Post
Individual Introductions	Introduce Yourself To The Forum	101	153	Yesterday @ 19:23 In: RC: Abster Warren RA(Hons)... By: Lowenna
Business Introductions (1 guest)	Introduce Your Business Or Organisations To The Forum	317	264	08 April 2014 In: Penelope Plastics By: Penelope Plastics

Horsham Chat				
Forums		Topics	Replies	Last Post
Horsham Chat (3 guests)	Horsham Forum - Chat about Horsham, West Sussex, Issues and Events.	440	1,437	Yesterday @ 18:37 In: Thanks to the T-Centre By: Lowenna

Southwater Chat				
Forums		Topics	Replies	Last Post
Southwater Chat	Southwater Forum - Chat about Southwater, West Sussex, Issues and Events	154	433	Yesterday @ 19:03 In: RC: What is the number for... By: Lowenna

General Chat				
Forums		Topics	Replies	Last Post
General Chat (1 guest)	General Chat - Chat about anything not specific to Horsham or Southwater	100	349	Yesterday @ 18:13 In: RC: Fight path By: Lowenna

Horsham Parents				
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Figure 6.14: Southwater Forum

Site:	Horsham and Southwater Forum: http://www.horshamforum.co.uk (last accessed 1.04.13)
Identity or provenance	Site provided by a local digital business: http://www.dotnetwebs.com that says it provides a variety of hyperlocal websites
Persistence	Site has been active since 27 th October 2006
Responsiveness	The forum has a good level participation with most threads gaining achieving double figures for views, and some responses and popular threads have regular (i.e. daily) posts and thousands of views
Constructiveness	The general tone and content is very positive about the local area though often antagonistic towards council activity

Table 6.16: Overview of Southwater Forum

The Southwater forum demonstrates a different form of 'hyperlocal entrepreneur'. The Southwater and Horsham Forum is very much based on a traditional economic model of advertising revenue from both a technology and business model perspective, and uses the site as the basis for developing a 'Visit Horsham' website. Despite the outdated forum technology this is an active and popular forum; however, this is changing as more casual traffic moves to Facebook.

Personal satisfaction examples:

Table 6.15 presents an example of a site created for personal satisfaction:

Example 1: The Eversdens



Figure 6.15: The Eversdens

Site:	http://www.the-eversdens.co.uk/ (last accessed 1.04.13)
Identity or provenance	There is an email contact form on the site for 'the editor' and David Farnell responds promptly to requests
Persistence	Content on the site goes back to 2008 and is regularly updated
Responsiveness	Though the site has no interactive features it does have content from residents other than Farnell
Constructiveness	The site shows a variety of activities in the village and generally showcases what is going on locally

Table 6.17: Overview of the Eversdens

David Farnell was interviewed by the Public-i team in November 2011. He described the website as a way to display his photos and his love of the village. He

sees it as a celebration of the village and an information source for local people. He is passionate about and very protective of it. He is frustrated about the potential for engaging the community online, which is not realised since not many seem to want to engage online. He is clear that he wants total control of his site.

Next steps with civic creators

This work provides only a very superficial understanding civic creators, their motivations and their potential impact. Future research could investigate these issues in more depth and would provide a much better understanding of the effects of digital and networked communities within localities.

6.3.6 Digital exclusion

Complete demographic data were not collected; however, the civic creators interviewed were clearly not representative of the wider population in terms of age, employment or educational achievement. While the sample is not large enough to allow generalization, it highlights the issue of digital inclusion and whether digital space would be sufficiently inclusive to be a viable arena for open democratic debate. The Office of National Statistics Internet Access Bulletin (released 14.11.12) states that in Q3 2012, 7.63 million adults (15% of UK adults) had never used the Internet. This was a drop from 16.1% (8.12 million) in Q1 2012 (“Statistical Bulletin Internet Access Quarterly Update,” 2012). Although the numbers of people not online are still falling, and Internet take up is rising there continues to be a group of people in society who can be considered to be ‘digitally excluded’, and this should be a persistent concern for anyone seeking to use the Internet in order to increase democratic participation.

Citing lack of access to the Internet as the reason for digital exclusion is simplistic. Many studies indicate a correspondence between digital and other forms of exclusion (Hampton, 2010; Helsper, 2008), and the Oxford Internet Institute Report (Blank & Dutton, 2013; Dutton & Blank, 2011; Dutton et al., 2009) examines the widening gap in of First Generation (those accessing from a fixed line internet connection) and Second Generation (those using mobile devices to access the Internet) users as being linked also to socio-economic factors. In these studies educational attainment seems to be more significant than financial circumstances, but there is a strong case for government to include more concrete targets in its Digital Inclusion policy (Helsper, 2011).

It is doubly problematic that educational attainment and socio economic factors affect participation in the political process both online and offline. In addition to the issue of Internet use, the strong link between Internet use and political efficacy (Dutton & Blank, 2011), and the link between political efficacy and engagement ("Audit of Political Engagement 5: The 2008 Report," 2008, "Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report," 2011, "Audit of Political Engagement 9 (part one): The 2012 Report," 2012; Gibson et al., 2010) mean that political participation can be seen to be skewed towards better educated and more affluent groups in society. This effect is compounded online if we look at the 'traditional' forms of participation examined in the Hansard Audits referenced above.

The picture seems rather bleak with respect to the potential for representativeness within digital space. It can be argued that digital political participation is drawing in a broader cross-section of the population than

traditional forms (especially younger audiences). However, this does not address the 'digital exclusion' described above.

There is a need to balance the pressure for change brought by increased use of the Internet for democratic participation, with ensuring that the socially excluded are not further excluded digitally by these changes. There is no 'silver bullet', but it is important to note that it is not yet possible to run any democratic process entirely online and be assured of its potential to be representative.

6.3.7 Understanding a locality

One of the primary pieces of evidence for growth in the significance of hyperlocal digital activity is that there are multiple websites within single geographical locations. This was noted in the West Sussex audit and subsequent data sets were examined for this kind of clustering. It seems to be rare, unless the sites were established years earlier, for example, the Harringay Online site that formed part of the Networked Neighbourhoods research described in Chapter 2, for a single site to dominate a local area.. This is an important finding in the context of how these sites might participate in the local democratic process and future strategy must take this into consideration. It also underlines the reasons for including 'representativeness' within the affordances of digital civic space. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

6.3.8 Discussion and conclusions

The social media audits addressed the primary concern of the Virtual Town Hall project in that they provided a way of establishing the existence of informal civic participation online and also providing the means to start to describe and categorise it. The list below summarises the main learning points and ideas taken forward into the final project:

1. Informal civic content can consistently be found online

- Informal civic sites and civic creators were found at each of the locations in sufficient numbers to reassure local government participants that there was a viable audience for online civic engagement work

2. There is huge variety in the content and content creators.

- The work has also established the lack of homogeneity online and the need to avoid trying to pigeonhole this activity either as a new iteration of local media or as simply another communication channel for pre-existing activity.

3. Informal civic sites and creators do not necessarily want to work with formal democratic actors

- This was not a surprising conclusion but the project highlighted the fact that there is some distance between the local authority project sponsors and the civic content creators.

4. Local authorities were not clear on how to respond to these sites with respect to policy or strategic planning

- In terms of how to respond to what was uncovered by the audit, the project sponsors have had a mixed reaction. When presented with

the civic space model as a potential area of development there was an even mix of interest, confusion and concern; as was the case with the Virtual Town Hall work, most of the participants voiced concern about organisational readiness to respond to what they were seeing happen online.

This project was not an attempt to create digital civic space; instead it examined the spaces being created by citizens, and evaluate them with respect to the design criteria content. The final project combined the learning from the first and second projects and explored how some of the barriers identified might be overcome.

6.4 Project Three: Cambridgeshire Renewal Energy Framework

The third project in this research examined whether it was possible to use the information gathered by the social media audit to gather participants in a co-productive conversation with respect to a pre-determined topic, and to use the audit in order to take an asset-based approach to working with the community (Diers, 2004). The project built on the experiences of the social media audits in order to bring together active citizens with a common interest in environmental matters – the base topic for the engagement process. The third project in the empirical work for this thesis examined all five of the design criteria outlined in Chapter 4 and was the only one of the three projects to attempt to facilitate a co-production relationship between citizens and government participants (design criterion 2), a process that is discussed in more detail in section 6.4.8. The face-to-face community engagement work was designed to reinforce and echo the

design criteria for the digital civic space, with the online and offline experience being considered to be part of a whole system of engagement. Once again the design criteria for digital civic space were developed further and table 6.18 outlines the changes made in this project:

	Criteria	Final version	<i>Project three application</i>
1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen.	<i>Public spaces were created online and offline by actively inviting civic creators to participate on their own terms (i.e. with unmoderated content).</i>
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-production relationship between citizen and government.	<i>Open space techniques were used to run community meetings and other areas of the project approach were co-designed with participants.</i>
3	Adopt a self-defined geography	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the civic creators.	<i>N/A This project focused on a specific topic and location. Natural place terms were used to search for participants and also to locate community meetings</i>
4	Open	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and	<i>Research data were published and the participants were able to contribute to the project design in order to build trust.</i>

		transparency. This means, e.g., that no any information available in the space must be available to all participants.	
5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.	<i>The digital civic space supported authentication via social networking identities of participants but this was not greatly used in the project.</i>

Table 6.18: Project three design criteria

This was a client funded project again: Cambridgeshire Horizons appointed Public-i to deliver the public engagement work required in order to create a Renewables Infrastructure Framework for the County (the CRIF),⁵⁴ which was described in Chapter 5. Public engagement in this context will usually involve arranging and facilitating public meetings, creating a communications campaign and perhaps conducting some of the primary research with the community. The CRIF team was keen to embrace a more co-productive approach to engagement work rather than

⁵⁴ The CRIF described in more detail in Chapter 4 was described on the project website as follow:

“The CRIF project intends to describe a cross organisational framework agreement and plan which will maximise opportunities to increase energy security in the local area, ensure that more energy comes from sustainable sources, and also to achieve £6bn of inward investment.” (captured 16.03.12)

the passive communication approach that is more usual. The client sponsor and project team had a stated desire to get stakeholders meaningfully involved in the project with a view to creating a network of people and organisations who would go on to use the CRIF once it was defined. Both the project sponsor and the major funder⁵⁵ agreed to the project and to its inclusion in my thesis research, and have been extremely supportive of the research aspect of this work.

The final CRIF project output resulted in an evidence-based report on the potential for renewable energy in the area, and three ‘pathways’ or action plans for how the community, and the public and private sectors might deliver this potential benefit and achieve greater levels of renewable infrastructure in the county. The engagement work described in this project informed both of these outputs and identified a network of active citizens who might go on to contribute to the described action plans.

Table 6.20 presents the timetable for project three:

Task	Description	Month
Preliminary Research	A social media audit, requiring with more detailed responses from prominent content creators	February - March 2011
First event	The individual identified by initial research plus	7 th April

⁵⁵ The work was funded in part by Cambridgeshire County Council, but the major funder was Sustainability East, a regional not-for-profit organization that works to promote greater use of sustainable energy and infrastructure in the area.

	<p>known activists and interested parties in the community, were invited to a launch event. The agenda was flexible, and after an introduction to provide some context, the meeting adopted an open spaces event format with the audience setting the agenda. Sessions were held on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kicking the tyres to question and understand the technical approach taken in the next piece of work (see below) 2. Community update - already existing projects that could potentially benefit from the CRIF explained what they were doing and where they had been successful 3. Initial discussion with the business community about their potential involvement in the project <p>Mapping other networks and groups that could/should be involved in the process. The event was webcast (in archive only due to technical issues), and social reporting tools⁵⁶ were used to provide open access to the content as well as a digital record of the meeting. Content was curated and summarised on the project website</p>	2011
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⁵⁶ Social reporting refers to the process of live reporting online - the social reporter uses social media in order to create live streaming of the event.

	along with blog posts and content from participants.	
Technical work	CAMCO carried out extensive desk based research which described, in detail, the potential for renewable energy in the county.	April / May 2011
Second event	<p>Following the initial technical work an event was held in order to present the output and start a more detailed conversation about the three pathways. This event involved content sharing and open debate on results. The second half of the meeting was in groups discussing the 3 pathways. Each group had a facilitator.</p> <p>Like the first meeting the event was webcast and social reporting tools were used to provide open access to the content as well as a digital record of the meeting. Content was curated and summarised on the project website along with blog posts and content from participants.</p>	25 th May 2011
Technical work	Further research and discussion with stakeholders conducted to identify specific projects and ideas for the implementation pathways and test the findings from the initial research	May / June 2011
Members event	A third event was held with elected representatives to present the results of the	15 th June 2011

	technical work prior to it being made available to the community. This was webcast and reported online.	
Commercial Sector events	An event was held for the private sector to supplement and extend the previous research. This took focus group format.	<u>Check</u>
Community events	Rather than hosting separate events. the project team attended other relevant meetings and events, ranging from Farmers Markets to Parish council meetings, in order to gain views on the project	18 th July 2011
Final event	The final event involved presenting the final draft of the pathways to invitees from each of the pathway groups and getting final comments and input before presenting the CRIF to the decision-making committee.	15 th November 2011
Decision meetings	Members considered all the project deliverables over the course of two meetings.	December 2011 January 2012

Table 6.19: CRIF Event timetable

The project differed from more conventionally designed engagement projects with respect to three elements:

1. taking an asset based approach (Diers, 2004) to development of the work by actively seeking people already interested in the topic rather than conducting a more general call for participation;

2. using social reporting and webcasting elements which made the process more open and accessible than usually achieved without this kind of embedded technology;
3. open space approach to the three project meetings made the events were more participatory and participants more open to change.

The other difference was the ultimate objective of the engagement work - not just to 'engage' with the public but also to create a network of people who would want to use the CRIF project output. The project team discussed the co-production nature of the work and looked for opportunities to open up the process and decision-making within the process.

6.4.1 What were the particular conditions in Cambridgeshire?

In order to understand what can be generalised from the CRIF project, it is useful to examine the unique context of this work. The following sections outline some of these unique aspects with respect to project participants.

6.4.1.1 *The right project sponsor*

There is some risk attached to direct engagement with the public and openness about the engagement process being about effective lobbying of politicians. The interviews and social media audits provided information on the views of community participants (discussed in section 6.3.5) with respect to politicians and revealed reticence about the political context of the decision being taken by politicians as to whether or not to adopt the CRIF.

The project commissioners, Cambridgeshire Horizons backed by Sustainability East, felt that they had a mandate to lead the process and work across organisations. They saw CRIF as an important project to implement from both an environmental and an economic perspective.

Cambridgeshire Horizons was set up a partnership representing the major public sector bodies in the area in order to co-ordinate Cambridgeshire's growth agenda, which is public sector speak for the process of local infrastructure projects linked directly to economic growth. Much of this work has been discontinued as a result of the reorganisation of local economic policy by the 2010 coalition government, which saw the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) replacing the Regional Development Agency (RDA). As a result of this change Cambridgeshire Horizons was closed in September 2011 in the middle of this project.

The key staff members on the project were transferred to Cambridgeshire County Council and the project was relocated there for the rest of the project by. The CEO of Cambridgeshire Horizons was appointed to a senior post in the county council and continued to support the project. However, there was disruption to the work due to staff changes. At the end of the project the project lead was working from the council not Cambridgeshire Horizons, which changed perceptions of the project; the district councils involved saw this as introducing bias.

The main significance of Cambridgeshire Horizons being project sponsor was that it had the trust of and convening power over multiple organisations in the area. It was able to convene meetings and garner support from stakeholder groups. The

team was well liked and well respected and known to be committed to the sustainability agenda while also being trusted by the more sceptical political organisations. The evidence to support this observation includes their ability to convene meetings of decision makers, and the fast response they obtained to requests from the CEO Alex Plant, to participants. In addition, in planning meetings the project team observed other organisations deferring to Cambridgeshire Horizons leadership on organisational matters.

6.4.1.2 Politics

The politics around the green agenda in Cambridgeshire were high profile at the time of the project for a number of reasons:

1. there were numerous publicly declared climate change sceptics within the political bodies⁵⁷ which meant that there was fairly constant conflict between them and the networks and individuals found during the initial search;

⁵⁷ This reflects the opinions of climate change policy experts in the project team who had seen a number of 'climate friendly' initiatives reversed since inauguration of the current (at time of writing) leadership of the county. This local news story captures some of the debate on this issue:

<http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/Home/End-of-plan-for-wind-farms-on-Council-land-26082011.htm> (Retrieved 14th April 2013)

And a blog post from the leader of Cambridgeshire County Council talks about the decision to reverse a decision to allow wind farms on county land

<http://nickclarkeconservative.wordpress.com/2011/09/06/wind-farms/> (Retrieved 14th April 2013)

2. several large-scale wind farm projects had gone ahead without community involvement and had caused a great deal dissatisfaction.⁵⁸ Wind energy was a sensitive subject despite having the greatest potential for sustainable energy growth in the area.

The local disquiet over these decisions was obvious at each of the community meetings (there were both opposing and supporting positions with respect to wind farms – see footnotes 14 and 15). The level of unhappiness was due to the existence in the area of some very active and effective environmental groups, for example the Transition Towns Movement and the Sustainable Parishes Project in South Cambridgeshire.

6.4.1.3 The people

Cambridgeshire also differed in levels of education and awareness of the topics. The presence of the University of Cambridge and the nascent clean tech industry located in the area meant that participants were well informed and articulate about the issues. Of course, it is not possible to estimate this effect without comparing with a similar project in a less endowed area. However, debate was conducted at an extremely high level with participants being able to discuss

⁵⁸ There are several high profile campaigns in the area:

- <http://www.stophthewindfarm.org.uk> (Retrieved 14th April 2013)
- <http://www.stopheydonwindfarm.com/html/Index.html> (Retrieved 14th April 2013)

The local planning decision against one of these was overturned by the CLGSPELL OUT :

1. <http://www.planningresource.co.uk/go/home/article/1079202/pickles-gives-go-ahead-cambridgeshire-wind-turbines/> (Retrieved 14th April 2013)

technical details with the team from CAMCO in a more sophisticated way than the project team experts were used to.

6.4.2 Finding the network

Based on the experience of the social media audit work described in above, the Public-i team embarked on a search to find individuals and groups in the area with an interest in sustainability and renewable energy. There was no expectation that we would capture a complete picture of social media activity in Cambridgeshire since the search terms were limited to a specific topic. However, it turned out to be one of the most fruitful research sites.

The websites and individuals found from the initial research were already working actively on creating renewable energy projects, were often writing very knowledgeably and authoritatively, and required neither permission from nor facilitation by the Public Sector. A total 325 sites were found (see Table 6.21 below):

Site type	Description	Count
Individual	Blogs, websites and Twitter feeds, with single creators, reflecting their opinions.	36, 30 of which can be considered influential
Individual / Political	Blogs, websites and Twitter feeds, individual but also distinctly political and require checking for balance.	14

Political	Sites affiliated to a party created by the party, a candidate or an elected politician.	25
Non-social	Traditional websites that represent community activity, but do not make use of social tools such as discussion boards, Twitter or general user generated content.	68
Community of interest	Sites focused on a specific issue or topic. run by clubs e.g. local sports clubs) or third sector organisations (e.g. Age Concern) and included because they meet the criterion of place or topic.	62
Social Campaign	Social media sites focused on a specific campaign.	49
Hyperlocal / Local	Websites set-up and run by members of the community in order to connect with and discuss local issues. They use social media tools and are probably the clearest expression of the “I want to talk to my community” intent.	71
TOTAL		325

Table 6.20: CRIF Social media Audit Results

Table 6.22 presents the topics identified.

Topic	Count
Agriculture	9
Environment	21
Flooding	2
Hyperlocal / Local	189
Local Issue	29
Sustainability	48
Transport	14
Waste Incineration	4
Wind	8

Table 6.21: CRIF Content Count results

Sites were tagged as hyperlocal/local if they were clearly interested in local community aspects as well as the ‘green’ issues on which we searched. This suggests higher levels of activity than in the other audits given that similar numbers of sites were found from using a smaller set of search terms.

Sites were not tagged as positive or negative towards the issue, and the research found several groups that were campaigning against wind farms in the area, but none became involved in the project. This lack of interest in involvement was not investigated further, but in the project team’s view was due to timing and lack of ‘live campaigns’ in the area.

Reach can be measured in several ways. Table 6.23 shows reach of CRIF work.

Face-to-face events are measured by attendance numbers.

6.4.2.1 CRIF coordinated events:

Event	Community	Public Sector	Commercial Sector	Total
Kick Off event - 7 th April 2011	Not known	12	0	12
CRIF Workshop 1 - 25 th May	19	30	14	63
Member Session 1 - 15 th June	0	19	0	19
CRIF Workshop 2 - 20 th July	13	35	37	85
Member Session 2 - 28 th September	1	15	0	16
Senior Officer Session - 12 October	0	15	0	15
Ely Market - 13 th October	45	0	0	45
Community Pathway event - 18 th October	16	2	2	20
Final event - 15 th November	20	17	28	65

Table 6.22: CRIF Event attendance count

In addition to physical participations, there were online viewers (note only 4 of the above events were webcast - see Table 6.24)

Event	Live	Archive
CRIF Workshop 1 – 25 th May	30	350
Member Session 1 – 15 th June	13	78
CRIF Workshop 2 – 20 th July	53	162
Final event – 15 th November	24	82

Table 6.23: CRIF event online viewership count

In addition to the face to face events, the team used social media to communicate with the public. Table 6.25 provides an overview of the audience reach through this method.

Channel	#Content	#viewers
YouTube	37 videos	647
Blog	81 posts	16 comments, 2080 views, 8 followers
Twitter	481 tweets	166 followers
Facebook	-	42 likes

Table 6.24: CRIF Social media activity count

The pathway events involved direct contact with relevant stakeholder groups and table 6.26 summarises physical attendance at events where the project was discussed.

Event	Pathway	Attendees
Whittlesey Summer Festival – 11 th September	Community	~500 (17 CRIF)
TCPA Planning Session 1 – 20 th September	Public	25
Gamlingay Environmental Action Group – 21 st September	Community	12
SCDC Sustainable Parish Energy Partnership – 21 st September	Community	?
Alconbury event – 24 th September	Community / Public / Commercial	~2500 (70 visited CRIF stand)
Greening Your Business - 30 th September		12
Fenland Green Business Club – 5 th October	Commercial	40
* TCPA Planning Session 2 – 18 th October	Public	18
CleanTech Sector event – 10 th October	Commercial	30
St Ives Business Event – 25 th October	Commercial / Community	15
Warboys Greener Living Event – 26 th October	Community	15
SmartLife Low Carbon Launch – 31 st October	Community / Public / Commercial	~150
* Developers' Forum – 2 nd November	Commercial	12
Transition Cambridge – 24 th November	Community	Not Known

Table 6.25: CRIF external event attendance

Note: *indicates meetings organised by members of the project team but not 'branded' CRIF.

The purpose of the events was both to raise awareness and also gather data about specific CRIF proposals which was collected in a questionnaire. These events yielded 116 completed questionnaires which added to the 21 online questionnaires (a total of 137).

The CRIF project objective was not just to reach people but also to engage them with the CRIF once it was up and running. Approximately 60 people attended the final event and more than half said they could see what their role would be in the on-going process.

6.4.5 Raising problems early in the process

One of the effects of the open meetings format was that problems and concerns were revealed immediately, rather than being shelved for later. They surrounded two main issues:

1. concern from participants, mainly community groups, that local politicians were not committed to the sustainability agenda;
2. concern from participants in commercial and community groups, about how the planning system operated between districts, and whether the two tier council system would be problematic for the CRIF.

Such concerns could be expected among groups working to get a project like this off the ground. The issue of coordination among planning processes is a fairly

sophisticated concern, but pertinent when the effort involves trying to co-ordinate a county wide scheme that requires cooperation from competing district planning committees. This is a challenge that can be seen an endemic issue with respect to the way in which global issues, such as climate change, can be enacted within the context of a localised planning framework. The tension between 'localism' and dislike of a 'postcode lottery' is particularly strong in the context of planning issues.

The fact that the politicians may not listen to the feedback gathered as part of an engagement or consultation process is a major problem for engagement practitioners, and a risk tends to be mitigated against by avoiding too much precision about the issue. Practitioners learn to manage different stakeholder groups according to different contexts. If politicians are playing an active part in the process, the aim is to keep this activity within the 'controlled' environment of a public meeting where questions and participation can be managed to some extent. This was particularly relevant in the context of the CRIF project. Several contentious sustainable energy projects had been undertaken earlier, which meant a great deal of negativity towards wind energy generation. There were also several climate change sceptics in the elected bodies and their positions on were well known and in the public domain.

These are fairly intractable issues and unlikely to be resolved within the duration of a short project. Uncovering these issues and acknowledging them at the start of the project meant they could be discussed and managed, and meant the project team had to be very clear that the engagement work was not a decision-making

process. It was continuously stated that the work would inform the politicians who would be making the decision over adoption (or not) of the CRIF in the form proposed. Community participants commented informally to the project team that they appreciated the honesty of this approach and politicians also accepted it.

6.4.6 Digitally-led

The project approach was to assume that the digital channel was primary and then to look for ways to complement and extend this facility where necessary – for participants it was described as ‘digitally-led’.⁵⁹ In practical terms, this meant that the project blog was the main instrument for updates rather than press releases or print brochures, and that resources were spent on elements such as social reporting and webcasting rather than production of printed material. A flyer with a limited print run was available at events, and there was a print version of the questionnaire; however, most of the information was digital. In order to ensure that the project reached groups who were not online, the team targeted these groups for the pathways events and looked for ‘connectors’ in the digital audience who could also raise awareness offline.

The project was also digitally led in the sense that many project elements were taken from the online environment. For example, the open space meetings and use of social reporting and live streaming to make content as accessible as possible

⁵⁹ More information about the project approach and the way in which digital channels were used can be found on the Sustainability East website where a project case study has been published: http://www.sustainabilityeast.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=99:renewable-infrastructure-framework&catid=75:skills-fund&Itemid=91 (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

mimicked digital innovation events such as CityCamp⁶⁰ and Social Innovation Camp⁶¹ formats. The idea that the project was 'open' and that there was an external audience was exploited during facilitation of the events, to focus participants on the need for an outcome or resolution to the conversation.

The project made extensive use of free platforms such as Wordpress, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and also used the Citizenscape platform to aggregate content.

Since the project also included a great deal of offline activity, the issue of digital inclusion was not raised since it was felt that some participants would feel disadvantaged by not being able to access the online content.

6.4.7 Facilitation and curation

Within the project team there was discussion about what skills would be needed to deliver the project as designed, and the project sponsor felt that public sector team members did not have the skills described below.

6.4.7.1 Facilitation

Open events require good facilitation because they involve many different types of stakeholders. In the early stages, it was necessary to encourage active participation in the agenda setting process which was an unfamiliar exercise to many, and later it was necessary to ensure that events remained focused on actions and outcomes rather than opinion sharing. This is a different style of facilitation to what is

⁶⁰ <http://citycamp.govfresh.com/about/> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

⁶¹ <http://www.sicamp.org/> (Retrieved 14th April 2013).

required for most community events, which are more focused on ensuring that everyone gets the opportunity to be heard.

6.4.7.2 Social reporting

Social reporting includes more than just tweeting what you see. A good social reporter must be able to provide an honest and accurate digital version of an event to which the reader can respond. It requires preparation before the event and usually a wrap up blog post to capture the overall impact of the event. Good social reporting can promote an online conversation that continues after the event.

The final point relates to the online space:

6.4.7.3 Curation

Curation was discussed in Chapter 4 section 4.5.2 as one of the coproduction design criteria. While the appropriateness of curation (compared to content moderation) was highlighted in the Virtual Town Hall project, it was not tested until the CRIF work was undertaken. Between meetings, the engagement role was to capture on-going conversations with the pathway groups and make them available to the wider audience. This was done through a succession of blog posts, YouTube clips from the pathway meetings, and use of Facebook and Twitter. The aim was to have a fairly complete digital repository that reflected all the views gathered during the project. The team deliberately included particularly challenging and negative views received in order to ensure a complete picture. Where digital content was created outside of the project team, this content was captured and amplified via the CRIF website. This process of content curation was

inherent to the proposed digital civic space design and was used actively in this project.

6.4.8 Embedded co-production

Co-production, as discussed in Chapter 3 section 3.3.1 and described in practical terms in the design for digital civic space in Chapter 4, involves treating all participants as actors in the process rather than regarding some as passive recipients of outcomes. By this measure the project was delivered in a co-productive way with highly participative events and an emphasis on highlighting current projects that would fit within the proposed CRIF. A good example of this was the technical session in the kickoff event which enabled participants to question and amend the approach to creating the research data.

The project made a concerted attempt to address the power balance in the relationship between the politicians and the other stakeholders by emphasising that the non-public sector pathways were, in many ways, freer to act than the public sector, and this was highlighted by the presence of elected representatives as participants rather than presenters at these events. This was balanced by ensuring that the decision-making process around the project was clearly communicated.

The emphasis on the outcome being a network of users for the CRIF and not just a head count of participants was another co-production element - the project was intended to ensure that something was built between the pathway groups, as a practical plan and not just a static report.

A final demonstration of this will be the final decision (the date for which is not yet known) and how politicians react to the coproduced content created. The need for 'permission to co-produce' highlights the tension between democratic and participative decision-making forms. Viewed positively, it can be seen as an important check to ensure that special interest groups do not overwhelm the process and make it unrepresentative of the area. Viewed more negatively, it this is a way of ensuring that the politicians maintain their power since they are free to ignore the views of the public.

6.4.9 Open government

The use of open data and the creation of an information-rich space was one of the qualities highlighted in the civic space design criteria and tested in this project. A large part of the technical work for this project was devoted to creating a technical baseline for what is possible for the region with respect to sustainable energy generation. This process was transparent, and all participants had a chance to question the methodology before the work was carried out, and to scrutinise results. This was one of the elements that made the politicians uncomfortable since they are accustomed to managing information flow and this part of the process required a great deal of careful negotiation by the project sponsors. The impact of having opened up the methodology in this way this was considerable; a shared understanding of the problem not only removes much opportunity for political grandstanding and was welcomed by community and local authority officer

participants, but also gave a sense of a shared problem and the possibilities of a co-produced solution.

The audience was unusual – the members had a good level of technical knowledge. However, the approach could be applied to a less technically knowledgeable audience as long as care was taken to encourage participation and could still have a major impact on the tone and nature of ensuing debate. With respect to digital civic space, the opening up of this evidence base to public scrutiny was critical in the view of the project sponsor. Nevertheless, it took several months for the project data to be released as ‘open data’ which points to the need for data management guidelines for subsequent projects.

6.4.10 What difference did the engagement approach make to the outcome?

At the time of writing the final outcome of the project was unclear. The CRIF has been cautiously accepted by the steering group and is being discussed by the district councils to decide on its adoption. The county council is continuing to support this work, but it is unclear how far any of the three pathways will be implemented.

I presented the results at one of decision-making meetings. It was clear that the elected representatives felt unable to discount the results of the engagement exercise and also felt under pressure to react to them. Engagement and consultation results are often ignored, for both good and bad reasons. The representatives might feel they know better about what their constituents want or

that the public does not appreciate the complexities of the particular issue. There can be problems related to timing - by the time the consultation results are discussed the decision-making process or context may have moved on. Whatever the reason, it is often the case that the elected representatives do not feel pressure to respond. In the present case, further discussion had created two unusual effects:

- creation of a network of actors meant that elected representatives had to accept that there was an active audience waiting for the outcome of the decision rather than an anonymous 'community'.
- the emphasis on co-production and the gathering of pledges to act from participants, and the additional emphasis on activities that were already underway, put additional pressure on the politicians who felt that they needed to exert control over something that was in some sense already happening.

In order to reach the next stage of implementation the CRIF will require nurturing and support. The nature of this initial engagement exercise, and especially the creation of a 'network of networks' around this issue, means it will not easily fade away. This persistence undoubtedly has affected project survival so far, and it will be interesting to investigate its continuing influence.

The citizen participants in the project represented individuals in the area who were already active but not necessarily representative of the whole area. This was an interesting departure from standard engagement practice which seeks to find a representative audience. Instead, the project relied on the participation of the

elected representatives to address this balance and it was clear to all stakeholders that these individuals were invited because they were interested.

It was difficult to capture the energy induced by approach in the events. Most went over time and involved lively and engaged conversation; feedback was extremely positive with people feeling it was worth giving up their time to attend. Many people attended multiple events, and a core of around 25 attended all of the main events.

The technology platform (Citizenscape, section 5.7) was underused and most of connections were made offline. However, the project did create shared digital civic space and a sense that all the actors within it were able to contribute equally. This tested many of the qualities described in Chapter three.

6.4.12 Summary of the CRIF results

The CRIF project operationalized the design criteria as well as embedding them in the design of an engagement programme to support a specific objective – the creation of a new renewable infrastructure framework for Cambridgeshire. The list below summarises the main findings:

- The introduction of the civic creators to the engagement process was effective in supporting a co-productive process
- The use of the design criteria within the offline as well as online design was also effective

- There were still significant issues with respect the skills and acceptance from the local government participants
- There were some unexpected benefits to the approach taken – for example the early surfacing of issues
- There was not the volume of digital interaction that was hoped for

Overall, the project was a success and, though limited in scope, was a useful exploration of the digital civic space design criteria, and the practical steps needed to implement them in the future.

6.5 Discussion and conclusions

This fieldwork was initiated with the ambition to help councils create digital civic space online. The design criteria for this space evolved through the course of the work until the focus shifted to connecting the conversations that are already happening, in spaces already being created back to the councils. The first and third projects that make up the fieldwork for this thesis reflect this change in thinking. Table 6.27 summarises the evolution of the design criteria through the course of the fieldwork:

	Criterion	Conclusion	Virtual Town Hall	Social Media Audits	CRIF
1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen.	The choice of the Town Hall as a metaphor for public space was deliberate however in testing this with civic creators it became clear that they did not perceive	This project looked at a wider view of what could be considered to be public space by exploring spaces created by citizens. This was not operationalized in this project but the learning was taken forward into the	Public spaces were created online and offline by actively inviting civic creators to participate on their own terms (i.e. with unmoderated content).

			the space in this way. During this project the space was described as shared rather than public and this was amended for future projects.	design for project three.	
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-productive relationship between citizen and Government.	This criterion was not considered at the onset of this project and was added as a result of project two.	This criterion was added following the interviews with civic creators and observations of their behaviours online	Open space techniques were used to run community meetings and other areas of the project approach were co-designed with participants.
3	Adopt a self-defined geography	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to 'natural place' described by the Civic Creators.	Natural place terms were used by the project team in order to search for civic creators however the virtual town hall sites were organised around the council boundaries rather than these terms..	Again, natural place terms were used to carry out the search and these proved effective in finding relevant content.	N/A this project focused on a specific topic and location. Natural place terms were used to search for participants and also to locate community meetings
4	Open	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and transparency. This means, for example, that no information should be available by the space that is not available for all participants.	This criterion was introduced after this experiment.	Most of the sites found through this project were not concerned with policy issues concerning democratic participation or engagement. Where we did find content of this kind there was a strong bias towards open government principles which, combined with supporting literature, indicated a need to add this criterion for project three.	Research data was published and the participants were able to contribute to the project design in order to build trust.

5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a standard that makes their contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.	The Virtual Town Hall sites supported user login but this feature was not used or tested as the sites did not launch	The social media audits attempted to identify individual civic creators from their self-reported credentials.	The digital civic space supported authentication via social networking identities of participants but this was not greatly used in the project.
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Table 6.26: Overview of changes to design criteria

The fieldwork addressed the three research questions identified at the start of this work:

6.5.1 Can we consistently find online activity within defined geographic locations which is both informal and civic?

The five research sites in project two found more than 150 civic websites which was an acceptable volume of activity for the local authority partners to consider the presence of digital civic activity to be a reliable factor in planning their engagement strategy.. All the sites showed evidence of persistence, identity, responsiveness and constructiveness, the criteria outlined in the design chapter. Discovery of the sites and their creators opens up additional questions not limited to understanding the full extent of this activity in localities. For example, the relationships, if any, between civic creators was not explored. While we might speculate about the existence of a ‘network of networks’ it can only be inferred from this work based on Twitter connections and the small sample of civic creators we spoke with. This raises the question of whether the public sector has a role to play in ‘co-ordination’ (which could consist simply of making people aware of other activities) and whether this is a necessary role. There is clearly more to

learn about civic creators, their motivations and their intentions, which could inform the future design of digital democracy and digital civic space.

The results of the empirical research indicate that citizens can create digital civic spaces themselves within their communities. In common with other studies the research indicates also that these citizens show little interest in political engagement or politics per se (“Audit of Political Engagement 8: The 2011 Report,” 2011; Brodie et al., 2009). The widespread growth of online content creation by citizens, is being enabled by the development of free, and easy to use content creation tools, and is transforming a former niche activity of informal civic participation observed by Wellman, Hampton and others into more mainstream activity (Bruns, 2010; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Kavanaugh et al., 2005; Rustema, 2001). The diversity and pluralism that is resulting from this suggests the need for different approaches with respect to public engagement.

The separate observation that civic content creators are not knowingly creating digital civic space, and their active dislocation from political participation make it difficult to be assert that these spaces are democratic in nature, or form part of the public sphere that Habermas theorised as requiring active participation. Communications within a community do not in and of themselves demonstrate democratic participation even if they revolve around an issue that could become the subject of democratic decision making. Informal civic participation as described and documented in Chapter four (section 4.2) and in the results of the Social Media Audit project (section 6.3) highlights something other than informal or formal democratic participation. However, it can be argued that informal civic

participation is an essential supporting activity for the democratic process.

The nature of the tools and how they are used results in these sites representing networks which, through their use of technology, become visible and accessible to external actors. These networks within communities often also exist offline, but are not as easily accessed as digital networks. The persistence, openness and 'publicness' of online networks, by Boyd and adopted as qualities used to identify civic creators, are qualities that present potential for greater democratic participation. Power operates differently in networks compared to hierarchical structures, and there is a tension between the hierarchical power of the formal democratic process and the informal power of the networks formed in communities observable in the hyperlocal sites explored in this thesis and in campaigning movements such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees (Blumler & Kavanagh, 2010).

The openness, visibility and publicness of these networks in an online context make it both possible and desirable for them to engage with the political process. In shifting the framing of evaluation of 'public' to that of Habermas's public sphere, we are proposing that, for many people, the publicness of their participation may be passive rather than active. As such, this participation arguably falls short of active participation in the public sphere whilst it remains informal and civic, according to the definitions in Chapter 3.

These networks and the online participation described here, are facets of the ways in which technology, and how we use it, are changing how we communicate. Whilst

the political class focuses on mainstream media to increase political engagement it might be more productive to look towards new forms of participation, and informal and civic activities, that remove the mediation of formal media and enable citizens to communicate directly with each other and with politicians. To regard this as simply a shift in communication channels is to ignore the cultural shifts accompanying the development of what Jenkins refers to as 'participatory culture'. It is this shift that represents the most profound changes with respect to the way communities and citizens might want to relate to local government in the future.

6.5.2 Can we create a digital civic space that brings together these civic creators in a single shared conversation?

The Virtual Town Hall described a digital civic space that could be used to aggregate content from civic creators. The concept appears to have been too broad and not sufficiently specific for the project teams to move forward and implement the idea. Nevertheless, project participants were attracted by the underlying usefulness of the concept, and subsequent work has expanded the description and focus of the idea of the Virtual Town Hall and transformed it into a description of digital civic space which has been tested with potential project leaders as part of the Social Media Audit project. The research described the proposed design criteria for digital civic space and are technologically achievable.

The second project explored the digital civic spaces that have already been created, and developed a number of design criteria suggested by the theoretical work. The final project aimed at enabling a single shared conversation by connecting these

different spaces into a shared digital civic space, and identified a number of benefits of the process.

6.5.3 What are the specific qualities of that space which are influential in terms of bringing about a good democratic experience?

This empirical work informed the development of the design criteria outlined in Chapter 4. The criteria evolved in the course of the projects from initial ideas based on the works in the literature review, to workable propositions for the design of digital civic space for the future.

The process highlighted cultural differences between the 'native' social web and the attitudes and process found within Local Authorities at the time of the research and this may prove to be the greatest challenge with respect to the subsequent creation of digital civic space.

Chapter 7 develops these conclusions in more detail.

Chapter 7: Discussion of results

This research began with a concern over the growing democratic deficit observed at the local and national levels in the UK, and the striking difference between shrinking levels of democratic participation and the consistent growth in online participation.

When I started the research, I assumed that this gap could be bridged by appropriate technology, and believed government was best placed to find the right solution. Both my assumptions proved inaccurate - or at least I stopped believing in them. One of the conclusions within this thesis is that it is futile to create eParticipation platforms which do not reflect any change in the underlying relationship between government and the public and do not deliver better levels of democratic engagement.

This research explores the space between community engagement and democratic participation and the changes that digital civic participation might make to that gap. While I started by believing the space could be 'filled' by an appropriate government eParticipation solution, I found that the space already hosts community activity but that this is largely disconnected from state-led endeavours to engage with the public. I rejected a media framing of this activity and instead have tried to demonstrate that, within the context of localities, online participation is an aspect of participation in civil society and, as a result, is richer and more varied and should be considered as than simply an extension to the fourth estate.

My research has resulted in three main conclusions. Firstly, that it is possible consistently to find digital civic participation online outside of government space, and that this cannot be categorized simply as citizen journalism. Secondly, that in order to connect the civic creators creating these spaces for the democratic process, the way that we approach community engagement should fundamentally change to reflect the social changes brought both by digital and networked technologies and an emergent participatory culture. Thirdly, I would suggest that, in order for this to happen and for the digital environment described in this thesis to play a role in addressing the democratic deficit, we need to be actively engineering digital civic space and ensuring the design criteria outlining here are adopted.

These conclusions are based in a conviction we are in a transition from a post-industrial society to a Network Society where digital networked technologies and our interactions with them are playing a significant role in our day-to-day existence. Drawing on the writings of authors such as Castells, Wellman and Raine, I would suggest that, if this is the case, then we need to redesign our processes of government and decision making to reflect the society in which we are living. My techno-determinist view at the start of this work changed in the course of the research and I now am convinced that we must consider online and offline in parallel, and use digital as well as physical civic spaces. These spaces must be aligned to the ways in which society is changing in order to ensure that our democracy is relevant to how people live their lives. The metaphor of digital civic space implies that government should be a shaper of space and a provider of infrastructure, and suggests the creation of opportunities to interact is more

central to participation in a vibrant democracy than the scripting and control of that participation. However, this shift must include more than a technological shift; if new, more participatory environments are created this would highlight the need for a model of democracy based on consensus, discussion and participation.

The act of shaping digital space will increasingly effect how we shape our public spaces as we embed the technology and blend online and offline environments. I believe that if government is not involved in this process, or limits its shaping to transactional processes, we will create a public realm that is designed to meet the needs of commerce and big business but not to respond to the smaller, more human and individual, civic needs of our communities.

7.1 Digital civic space

Numerous scholars have discussed the impact of digital networked technologies on our democratic system, primarily within the context of the impact of the technologies and associated behaviours on mainstream media. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that it is the ability of citizens to communicate directly, and to form their own spaces, that creates the greatest opportunities and threats to our current democratic process. The public is demonstrably (see Ch. 6 section 6.3) talking about its communities and civic issues, and is choosing to do this within spaces of their own creation and control. Castells (Castells, 2012, p. 11) described these spaces as ‘spaces of autonomy’ that exist in-between the online and offline spaces: “The critical matter is that thus new public space, the networked space

between the digital space and the urban space, is a space of autonomous communication”.

Castells introduces these spaces in the context of networked social movements such as seen in the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, and suggests that these movements will erode rather than remove our instruments of state (Castells, 2012). This thesis argues that, in order for citizens and government to work together in the context of the Network Society that Castells was describing, and to address the issue of democratic deficit defined at the start of this work, there is a need actively to create digital civic space which embodies certain qualities, theorised in Chapter 4 and described in Table 7.1:

	Design criteria	Definition
1	Public	It should be a public space that is available to any interested citizen.
2	Co-productive	The space should facilitate a co-production relationship between citizen and government.
3	Able to adopt a self-defined geography or topic	The geographical reach of the space should be self-defined by users with administrative boundaries being subordinate to ‘natural place’ described by the civic creators. The topic should be defined by participants and not imposed from outside.
4	Open and information rich	The space should support the principles of open government with respect to data, process and transparency, e.g. all information available on the space must be available to all participants.
5	Known identities	The space should be able to authenticate the identity of participants to a degree of confidence that makes their

		contribution available to consultation and policy-making processes.
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Table 7.1: Final design criteria

7.1.1 Why might we need the state to create these spaces?

One of the recommendations of this thesis is that the state - at local as well as national level - should start to create digital civic space as distinct from the eParticipation platforms discussed in Chapter 3 section 3.1 for at least three reasons. First, as a way of ensuring that online public discourse is better able to support the democratic process and to overcome some of the limitations of the networked public created by non-government designs. For example, Sunstein sees this possible intervention as a way to overcome what he describes as the tendency towards homogeneity and lack of diversity in our online experiences, and Coleman suggests that civic space should be an extension of government's procedural responsibility for the process of democratic deliberation.

Second, these spaces offer an opportunity for elected representatives to more easily form meaningful relationships with the public online. While participation in these spaces has been shown to enhance individual relationships between elected representatives within local authorities and citizens (K. Harris & Flouch, 2010b), there needs to be much wider participation by politicians than is currently evident, in order to effect a change in the relationship between citizens and politicians. Take, for example, the kind of 'direct representation' described by Coleman (Coleman, 2005b). Based on my fieldwork, I would suggest that actively creating digital civic space might address some of the challenges to politicians and citizens interacting online. Digital civic space would: i) provide some assurance to

politicians that they were interacting with citizens; ii) ensure all parties have with access to relevant information; and iii) ensure that politicians are less likely to dominate the space and dialogue as a result of their position.

Thirdly, the research showed that democratic and civic activity online can be described as disconnected and this is confirmed in the literature. There is a considerable gap between the scope of political communications and its concern with participation in the political process. In the participation literature, concern over engagement focuses on the acts of individuals and their empowerment outside of the political sphere. It can be argued that considering civic and political participation as separate acts weakens participation in the democratic process. A shift to more digital activity makes this separation more obvious as a result of both the publicness of the content created and the context collapse afforded by digital space. The interaction, or lack thereof, between different parts of society is highlighted by these developments. For digital civic space to exist online in a way that makes it likely, or even possible that participation might connect to democratic debate, it must take account of this context collapse and provide seamless connection between civic and democratic experience. This contrasts with the current segregation of government and civic actors requiring action within their own spaces and not in a shared environment.

There is a final argument about why government might want to create and nurture digital civic space. While it is commonly held that online spaces create real networks and connections beyond the technology, it can be demonstrated also that any shift in the platform would affect behaviours, and risk loss of audience and

participants. Managing technological change within the context of creating persistent digital civic space requires these imperatives to be balanced. Online community practitioners can attest to the difficulty of making interface or functional changes without working closely with users, and a major platform shift is difficult to achieve without some degree of member attrition. The discussion of digital civic spaces in Chapter 3 is technology agnostic and does not examine the possible effects of specific platform choices; this is an important area for practical and research consideration in the future.

The immediate response to the challenge of funding these sites in the face of the current cash constraints on local authorities as well as civic creators, would be to make the whole set of interactions a free service or available in space such as Facebook or Wordpress. These two represent radically different technological options and demonstrate that there are many choices to be considered before a final decision. A technology driven response will carry the problem of technology obsolescence; the service selected must meet explicit criteria that enable it to evolve as the technology changes, in order to continue to meet the original design purpose and deliver some kind of continuity of the space if not for the initially chosen technology. This is by no means guaranteed by a 'free' service which can change its terms and conditions whenever it chooses or needs to. The question about which online identity unlocks the individual's access to the wider social web is very much open, and the individual decision about whether to base an identity on Twitter, Facebook or Google+, for example, might reduce the number of future platform migrations. The constant evolution of the technology is outside individual control, and civic creators will need to constantly adapt to support a hyperlocal

site or local civic conversation over time.

The question of renewal, in whatever form, is important and grows more acute as the value of these spaces to the wider community increases. Renewal is an issue in many volunteer environments as well as with respect to political representation. Many interviewees were ready to hand over at least some control, but are not sure to what authority. The issue is compounded in a digital environment where pressure on skills may force the need for renewal.

Massey's description of place as space (Ch. 3 section 3.7) that has been given narrative, suggests it might be fruitful to focus on narrative persistence as distinct from identity and technology although realised by both. If the essence of the civic web space is the ability to find and connect to your community online then it is this persistence of narrative which coverts individual contributions into a place. Community consists of multiple networks which are constantly refreshed and replenished - this is a 'philosophers axe' kind of persistence and would not provide the stability needed in terms of constant ability to connect citizens to their communities, which is one of the criteria discussed in Chapter 3 as a necessary quality of Digital civic spaces. In project two persistence was one of the criteria used to qualify civic creators for inclusion in the data set, and persistence of an individual's activity is different from network persistence, which may or may not be dependent on the activity of this individual. The social media audits showed a consistent minimum level of activity, but the behavioural characteristics described in Section 6.3.5 show that they are mostly solitary activities, with network or community building as a by-product rather than the primary objective. While

research by the Oxford Internet Institute and others shows us that content creators generally, are in the minority online, the even smaller number of civic content creators leaves digital civic spaces highly dependent on the voluntary efforts of a small number of people, which is a concern in the context of a proposal to connect this activity to the decision-making process.

The proposal in Chapter 4 of this work, is that persistent digital civic space could be created by aggregating all of the influences in the area in a network, and making the network open and transparent, and emphasizing the people and the shared narratives of the place, rather than assuming that the civic conversation can be captured on one platform and dictated by one voice. This responds to the democratic requirement for openness and the practical technology requirement of avoiding dependence on a single technology and a small number of civic creators.

The need to renew infrastructure is already a requirement for real world infrastructures - libraries, schools, council chambers. However, in an environment that is created through words and stories, this renewal is more intangible. It is probably only by making this fact known and part of the civic conversation, that this issue can be addressed.

7.1.2 A fragile new environment

Existing digital civic spaces are being created by a relatively small number of individuals within the community; this research perhaps provides the groundwork and a method for a wider examination of the scale of this type of activity. It has provided some estimate of the number of these sites in an area, but a larger sample

could explore correlations between the numbers of communities in an area rather than the simple per capita calculation used here. A skilled civic content creator and website owner is a considerable asset to a locality in a number of ways, for example they can extend the reach of civic messages and conversation and also create a strong local network for interactions within these communities. At a time when the costs of reaching individuals are extremely important, and as resources stagnate or reduce, it means that councils may need civic creators more than civic creators need the council.

Different technologies appeal to different groups of people ("Communication Choices," 2012) and an individual's specific choices related to tools for digital civic space will affect the size and nature of the audience that this space will reach; this limitation needs to be borne in mind as government starts to engage with communities via this means. While networks might be becoming more public in some ways, there is a risk of creating different types of technological ghettos.

Despite the proposal for the need for digital civic space, throughout the research and writing up the thesis I have struggled against a technologically evangelical position - the potential of digital solutions can be seductive, but as Brooks (Brooks, 1987) famously wrote, there is no silver bullet of technology, and it would be both naive and shortsighted to assume that new technologies can be social panaceas. In considering the potential of the social web to address the democratic deficit and improve democratic participation discussion, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the online environment when addressing these issues.

Chapter 6 section 6.3.6 discussed the issue of digital exclusion and, while the evidence supports the belief that we are seeing ever increasing numbers of people going online, there are still significant issues related to the exclusion of some groups within the population, and a risk that these will become entrenched. In addition, not everyone wants to participate online, and this question of choice is perhaps one the more subtle challenges that need to be addressed. Throughout this thesis I have argued for the benefits of developing democratic practice to fit better with an emergent participatory culture and active online citizens, but to do this in such a way as to privilege this segment of the population. Arguably, the current democratic structures are skewed towards an older, wealthier and better-educated segment of the population (see the Hansard Society analysis of electoral participation); we should question the basic fairness of simply replacing this with a democratic infrastructure that simply privileges a different group.

There is the further difficulty related to trying to match the speed of adaptation of government, technology and society. Government changes slowly compared to the pace of change related to new technologies. Government is not 'agile' and takes time to adapt to changing circumstances. However, the emergent technologies that are shaping society, such as the growth of social media platforms, have changed and will continue to change rapidly. As a practitioner, it is frustrating to see government attempts to keep up with the application layer of the Internet while simultaneously failing to address the challenges to governance style and infrastructure that would support a more mature, public debate about the management and ownership of personal data.

7.1.3 Bridging the democratic gap

In considering the issues of democratic deficit raised in Chapter 2, and the potential for digital technologies to address it, the current eParticipation response to the growth of digital media can be argued to be inadequate. Its focus on the creation of new platforms and processes makes prioritisation of participation, and creation of democratic 'experience' secondary aims and obscures, or even avoids, their potential contribution to developing a participatory culture.

Throughout this work I have pursued the potential for online civic participation to, in some way, provide a bridge between citizens and their elected representatives. However, given that many of the active citizens contacted during this research do not perceive their activity as democratic/political it might be that civic creators do not wish this gap to be bridged. If so, this has some serious implications for the potential of digital civic space to provide a solution to democratic deficit.

My approach has been to focus on digital space as part of the solution for improving democratic participation, while, at the same time, noting that, without a better understanding of the active citizens who are shaping digital spaces, it cannot be claimed to be the whole answer. One solution might be to explore their offline as well as their online activities since these active citizens are not, in most cases, active only online.

There is a further implicit question that emerges in this thesis, about the nature of civic and democratic space online, and whether it is formed by the public or whether it requires state intervention. The proposal outlined here, based on

fieldwork observation of more than a thousand civic websites, is that digital civic space can and will be formed online by active citizens. Discussions with local authority officers and elected representatives, undertaken as the Virtual Town Hall project described in Chapters 4 and 5, suggest that in order for this proposal to become a part of the political conversation, these spaces require additional qualities, and participants who have made an active decision to participate in the local political conversation.

7.2 Impact on policy and policy making

At the time of writing, all aspects of government were wrestling with the austerity measures put in place by the 2010 coalition government and the resultant shrinking in the size of the state with respect to funding and scope. As services are being withdrawn, there is active and ongoing debate within the local government sector about whether a more co-productive relationship with the public and higher levels of community resilience might start to address this gap (Boyle et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 2011; Shafique, Kippin, & Lucas, 2012). The fieldwork for this research identified many active citizens with whom such a relationship could be built and also provided an indication of the potential of the digital environment for finding these citizens.

The desire to shift to a more co-productive relationship between citizens and state in order to 'balance the books' could be seen as a negative motivation and one with questionable benefits for the citizens involved if their efforts are seen simply as a way of addressing budget cuts. This thesis suggests also that there are more positive reasons for making this shift as we redesign our state institutions to

reflect the social changes that have been described as creating a more participatory culture (Jenkins, Rheingold) or a networked society (Wellman, Castells). If we take Wellman and Raine's networked individual (Raine & Wellman, 2012) as being at the heart of this new system, then we can imagine how digital civic space that reflects the network of networks within which these individuals operate, provide opportunities for a range of different types of government agencies to form new and more active relationships with citizens reflected in the way that decisions are taken and not just in service delivery.

Digital civic or hyperlocal websites cannot simply be categorised as being either a part of the evolution of local media, or an online extension to offline civic participation. Hyperlocal websites should be considered in the same way that blogging can be considered a medium in and of itself (Boyd, 2006). They can be considered to be a participatory act, but the objectives and motivations of the participants are varied and widespread. Where this act of participation differs from offline participation is in the publicness of the content and the networks which are created, as well as the persistence of the content that is created.

To some extent, the nature of the response to this online activity depends on the framing of the activity by the Local Authority. If the online activity is managed by the local authority Communications Department, it is often considered similar to hostile media. If the social media channel is managed as part of the local authority engagement process the response might be more collaborative.

Conversations with local government officers and politicians highlighted the most

‘different’ thing they encountered when working with activists or citizens active in the online space, was the self-reliance and positiveness of these individuals compared to their offline equivalents. This is difficult to quantify, but reflects the fact that some of the cultural qualities of online space in terms of collaborative, open and networked behaviours enable easier participation for affected stakeholders.

A number of recommendations for policy makers emerge from the this research:

1. Develop new approaches to community engagement which will create meaningful relationships with the civic creators identified in this work;
2. Create new digital civic spaces to help better connect informal civic participation and the democratic process
3. explore new ways of organisational working which relate to the networked nature of the social web and a Network Society.

This section discusses these recommendations in more detail.

7.2.1 New approaches to engagement

One of the themes that emerged from this work and, in particular, from the engagement work within the CRIF Project (Ch. 6 section 6.4) are how the theory and practice of community engagement needs to adapt to the ways that citizens are using civic spaces to self-organise. Looking forward and considering the democratic system, can we foresee a future where democratic and community

engagement practice come together?

In the fieldwork described in Chapter 6, a more open and co-productive process resulted in reported increases in the levels of empowerment in the group, but was unsettling for the politicians because the results were less easily ignored but were less 'reframe-able' into the familiar political contexts. A question arose also about whether adoption of the proposed digital civic space will create a new form of intermediation between citizen and representatives that will fundamentally alter what is required from a future community engagement process.

The other shift observed in the CRIF approach, was the start of an active search for those individuals most likely to participate, i.e., the idea that we should look first for those who wanted to participate. Practitioner evidence suggests that most engagement programmes are planned formally around the idea of accessing as wide a group of participants as possible and an emphasis on appearing to be inclusive. It implies perhaps discreet attention to groups for whom the work might be of particular relevance, but overall the aim is achieving as balanced and representative a sample as possible despite a tacit acknowledgement that the groups and individuals who turn up may well be 'the usual suspects'. While community development work will often focus on a specific group in the locality community, engagement work is usually intended to be inclusive.

The idea to actively seek out people who want to participate and openly adjust afterwards for representativeness, represents a considerable shift in practitioner thinking. Nevertheless there was a tentative consensus that this change resulted in

the formation a more collaborative and solution focused group of participants and represented a shift in the 'norms' by which participation is elicited by practitioners. One practitioner with whom I had worked on another similar project, said it had made realise that 'community engagement doesn't need to be this hard' in relation to the idea that we might seek out those who could and would help solve problems. This is not to say that solutions may not come from all parts of the community or stakeholder groups, but the learned helplessness endemic in on-going community engagement, is a growing concern for practitioners and needs to be resolved by seeking out all citizens with an interest in community engagement.

There is potential for various pressures to be brought to bear on community engagement practice as it adjusts to changes in the democratic relationship. The result of increasing the amount of direct communication between citizen and representative, which is inherent in the description of direct representation proposed by Coleman (Coleman, 2005c), is unlikely to leave the nature of the interaction between engagement practitioners and the public untouched, and will require these professionals to achieve new relevance in these re-negotiated relationships.

7.2.2 New spaces for community and democratic interactions

Perhaps the most fundamental adjustment required of government, as the prospect of online interaction between citizen and state becomes more likely, is in understanding the social web not just as a passive space on which one can broadcast and expect a desired outcome. Implicit in this suggested shift is the

belief that democratic and civic interactions can and do happen outside of government managed space, outside of current eParticipation spaces, and that a different approach is needed to connect these interactions to more formal and 'managed' democratic process, and to change the nature of the relationship between the citizen and government.

The suggested design criteria for digital civic space reflects many different empirical and theoretical aspects, but are intended to bridge the observed gap between the civic spaces that citizens are building for themselves and the practical requirements of a democratic process. This gap was observable in the Virtual Town Hall and Social Media Audit projects where the expectations of civic creators that could set the agenda did not match the closed processes available to council officers. The final project - the CRIF project - experimented with and had some success in creating a more co-productive relationship.

The combination of code and content that forms the Web 2.0 space is co-productive in the sense that participants are both designing and producing outcomes. There is a 'fit' here with discussion in the literature on community engagement, which suggests that more participative processes deliver better engagement outcomes (Bovaird, 2005; Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006). There are also signs that citizens want a more co-productive relationship with the state (Coleman & Shane, 2011).

The difficulty related to designing these spaces is how to combine democratic accountability with a co-productive environment. This inclusion of co-production

in the design elements for digital civic space is based on a belief that if a space is to be successfully co-productive it is important that local actors own the space jointly, and that government does not control it. The reasons for this are as follows:

- one of the issues associated with the decline in democratic participation is lack of trust. This is often assumed to be lack of trust in the politicians, but there is also a lack of trust in government about the behaviour of citizens. Reciprocal trust is needed for the relationship to be transformed. The 'owner' of the digital space and the controller of the technology have disproportionate power, which needs to be balanced in some way through governance and access;
- engaging with citizens via the social web should be considered a diplomatic rather than a technological issue. The culture of the social web is highly collaborative and transparent and can be seen as rejecting control or monitoring;
- If we assume that a healthy democracy requires active citizens (Rowson & Norman, 2012; M. Taylor, 2009) then building the idea of government management into digital civic space is unnecessary; we need only to explore how to manage the transition to that state;
- agile decision-making and faster response times will be needed to connect digital civic space to the policy making process. If we accept that the speed of technological change is bringing about increasingly rapid social change then decision-making processes must be built on iterative, self-regulating models that incrementally follow an agreed strategic direction, and not the more cumbersome 'waterfall' models of

government that resonate with Stoker's (Stoker, 2010) experiment based policy making. If pressure for social change were to work more directly on government it would ensure that policy making that is responsive to the immediate reality of people's lives would be more likely. A co-productive environment would this more possible by making citizens active participants rather than customers.

Including the condition of democratic validity for the local digital civic space should ensure that decisions are fair and reasoned, and reflect the wider macro environment rather than just to issues pertaining to the hyperlocal level. Co-production means the process is shared with all participants; a democratic model takes account also of the interests of non-participants.

7.2.2.1 Civic creators

Community engagement experts have recognized the importance of finding and nurturing relationships with engaged and committed individuals within the communities they work with (Barnes et al., 2008; Barnes, Sullivan, Knops, & Newman, 2004) and, in many ways, the role of civic creators identified in this research is an extension to this work. One of the practical implications of this thesis research is the suggestion that councils and elected representatives should seek out and form connections with civic creators.

Civic creators are a minority within a minority. Not only are they part of the relatively small number of people who create content online, they constitute an

even smaller group of people who create community focused content online. Identifying and questioning them (see results in Ch. 6), we found that whilst their motivations vary, their existence is consistent as shown also by other studies (Bruns & Humphreys, 2007; Gaved & Anderson, 2006; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; K. Harris & Flouch, 2010a; Rustema, 2001).

This research has demonstrated that although some of these civic creators (see Ch. 6 section 6.3.5) are connected to pre-existing networks or communities, many are not. This leads to speculation about whether, with appropriately designed processes, these groups might contribute to resolving the problem of democratic deficit through their demonstrated open and participative behaviours.

It would be inaccurate to treat civic creators as a single group for a variety of reasons:

- different technology networks lead to different social networks: different technologies suit different individuals and create different networks. There is no external obligation or impetus for or clear benefits from these groups 'getting on'. If individual civic creators choose to participate in decision-making then this will require some mechanism to ensure that every group is aware of the activities of all other groups. In other words, there is a need to network the networks in order to create the potential for groups to explore the trade-offs from and wider opportunities of more - and more extensive collaboration. Networking of networks creates connections and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) while at the same time reducing the risk of

homogeneity described by Sunstein (Sunstein, 2009) and the 'filter bubble' described by Pariser (Pariser, 2011).

- different motivations bring different outcomes: while the number of our interviews was small and their scope limited, the interviews with civic creators highlighted the variety of motivations and incentives that animate civic creators. The basic typologies suggested in this work could be further developed to help illuminate these behaviours and identify points of commonality in behaviour with politicians and government officials.

Both of these points are important with for developing digital democratic engagement because of the significance of civic creators for the nascent digital civic space; their motivations and objectives will be critical for the on-going development of online civic activity. They are central also to offline civic participation where gatekeepers and activists play an essential role in forging links between the public, third and civic sectors. This centrality has been identified as a weakness in the participation process and the problem of the 'usual suspects' (Foot, 2009). Foot describes the difficulty of ensuring that these participants provide open and unmoderated relationships with the wider community while also playing the vital role of mediation and connection. Online this role functions differently; the openness and publicness of the social web reduces gatekeeper power, but simultaneously increases collaboration opportunities.

These civic creators do not need training to use the social web; they are already able to create their own spaces and networks. They need no direction from politicians, they are already creating and following their own agendas and

supporting their communities in the ways of their choosing. The challenge for local democracy is that what they are not doing is connecting to the political and democratic decision-making process as a matter of course.

Whether or not it is possible to consistently find civic activity online within local communities was at the heart of the empirical part of this thesis. The design criteria discussed in the previous sections are predicated mostly on its existing. In the five geographic areas examined in Project 2, there was evidence of local civic networks becoming active online, for example, in the form of parish council websites or less formal networks such as local history groups, and evidence also of new civic networks being created such as WV11, the hyperlocal site in Wolverhampton discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.3.5). There are examples of ‘traditional’ networks such as the Women’s Institute and Neighbourhood Watch and newer forms of networks such as Guerrilla Gardeners who organize online to transform neglected urban spaces using ‘seed bombs’ and planting. These networks are social with respect to the technology chosen and because they seem to reflect real world social connections. The individuals studied in this research were creating content that is intended to connect to their local communities, and demonstrate an interest in local civic affairs. This local participation is at odds with the general experience of offline civic participation in the UK, which recent evidence (“Audit of Political Engagement 9 (part one): The 2012 Report,” 2012) describes as, at best, weakened and, at worst, in decline.

The behaviour of the civic creators found by the social media audit process echoes the positive effects of online communities in local areas found in other studies

(Bruns, 2010; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Kavanaugh et al., 2005). The literature on citizen activism provides evidence of community networks in asset based work by Diers (Diers, 2004), conducted in Seattle, and Andrew Mawson's (Mawson, 2008) in the East End of London. The networks are not necessarily unique to the online space, but I would argue that they are easier to find and more accessible to people outside of these networks when they are active online.

In this thesis, civic creators who create digital civic spaces are described intending to communicate to their community. Civic creators are also identified based on the constructiveness of their sites, and evidence of community reach. Thus, it can be argued that the digital civic spaces they are creating have the potential to form a network of constructive and civic-minded people who want to connect with their communities. If councils are looking for citizens with whom to engage in a coproduction relationship then these sites and their participatory behaviours are an excellent starting point. Their effectiveness and persistence rely on individuals creating and maintaining these sites; these individuals can be vital connectors within local civic networks.

We also enquired the sites and their creators show evidence of a desire to be involved in the decision-making process. Not all civic creators will want to be involved in the democratic process and it might be more realistic to assume that their preference will be *not* to get involved, based on this and other studies. For example, the interviewee in Cumbria who claimed to 'do everything a politician does without being political' and the blogger interviewed in Cambridgeshire who described his sense of disenfranchisement with local decision-making. Their

motivations for carrying out their informal and civic activities are many and varied, but it is reasonable to assume that these people need to be respected rather than forced (if that were possible) into a formal process with which they have no affinity.

This research shows that citizen initiated digital civic spaces lack some of the qualities that might facilitate their participation in local decision-making. The individuals involved may not feel a lack of these qualities. However, it is plausible that without active design intervention these online spaces will not have the design qualities that allow easy connection of citizens' civic behaviour to the decision-making process. I suggest that there is enough civic-type activity and sufficient concern about the current democratic deficit to justify further policy making experimentation by local and central government, to accommodate and promote these new spaces. Of the five design criteria suggested, only the first three can reliably be observed in the digital civic spaces created by citizens and it could be argued that these are not consistently present.

In considering the role of active citizens, the conclusion of project participants was that there should be a difference in our approach to effective individuals –social reporters – and the people managing local community sites. Their motivations and concerns are diverse and this should be reflected in their roles in civic space. A formal role might be appropriate based on the naturally occurring role captured in this comment from an exit questionnaire:

I think we do already see community ambassadors as such playing a role in

online forums. I do not necessarily think it needs a designated role but there will always be people who will defend the Council, for example, when they feel it's right to do so. This role comes naturally as the organisation builds relationships with other Members of the online community. It will happen whether or not it is pursued but it's maybe better in a less formal role.

(Communication Officer, Chorley)

Currently it is procedurally difficult for government to 'listen' to content and ideas provided via social media and, as a result, online activity might be engaging, but is imperfectly connected to decision making, and not seen as part of the body of evidence supporting policy making. This contrasts with the robust (from a policy making perspective) conditions of eParticipation which provide evidence, but with unacceptably low take up.

By employing the principles of digital civic space it would be possible to bridge this gap and to listen more effectively to the public online, but only if the appropriate relationships are formed with the active citizens found there. Many agencies I spoke to are seduced by the seeming ability of social media to allow them to listen to the public. However, I would argue that this 'listening' is nothing more than another form of surveillance if we do not, at the same time, seek to create a relationship with those we are listening to.

7.2.4 New ways of organisational working?

An exploration of what citizens are doing online contrasts starkly with the question of internal council readiness to work with the public in a different way.

The project teams for both the Virtual Town Hall and the CRIF projects were aware of this tension and many of the project participants felt frustration that their organisation had not 'caught up' with the way the public was using social media:

It's already happening so we've got to deal with it! I think there can be a reluctance at times to discuss or put something that could become a negative for the Council out through Social media channels. I think we've got to be braver in doing this and explaining decisions/actions so that people can make their own mind up as to whether they agree or not. For example, this week we posted information about new parking machines for one of our car parks and we got criticised. We've got to ask ourselves whether this was the right thing to do or should we have kept quiet. It's a debate we're currently having. We're definitely ready in terms of doing it...but we've got to realise it will be a two-way conversation unlike if we just send out a press release and it gets reported in the local paper.

(Communication Officer, Chorley)

The need to emphasise two-way communication was a particular focus of much of the discussion in the Virtual Town Hall workshop sessions, with participants noting the tendency for their organisations to broadcast to rather than converse with the public. However, each of the participants was aware of the cultural change that would be required by their organisations in order to operate effectively in this environment, and that there is a lot of internal resistance to this change. In an exit questionnaire, one participant described the shift to a more conversational relationship as being 'big dive stuff' rather than just like dipping a toe in the waters

of social media:

Incrementally yes - toe dipping in calmer waters is more palatable than the big dive. Broadcasting and consultation remain the principal approaches in the context of Social media. Dialogue and engagement is big dive stuff and requires a shift in culture, particularly at middle manager level in organisations. The extent to which this can provide blockages should not be under estimated. (Head of Democratic Services, Kirklees)

This need to deal with the changing behaviour seen on the social web is, of course, not unique to this project; it is a challenge that is faced throughout the sector. This challenge is multifaceted and includes service delivery, communication, consultation as well as democratic engagement. The Virtual Town Hall project highlighted the different levels of readiness for this, not just in comparing councils, but also within councils. At the centre of this concern is the need to overcome the political difficulties caused by creating a more open relationship with the public.

The fact that many elected representatives and senior officers are not active online means that, for some of them, the social web can be ignored. However, this is changing as can be seen in the Internet usage data outlined at the start of this thesis (Ch. 1 section 1.1).

The term curation was used in this thesis to refer to the process of managing content to encourage debate, but also as a conscious mechanism that counters the homogeneity of the online experience and attempts to ameliorate the problem of

the 'daily me' which is where we expose ourselves most often to the views of people with whom we agree. It is not suggested as a design criterion, but rather as an additional behaviour and skill required by the creation of digital civic space. It also requires a change from assuming that democratic space needs to be moderated. When asked, most of the research participants agreed that content curation was an important element of a successful site – but there was no consensus as to who should carry this out. The link to decision-making, and the development of a more co-productive relationship, is clearly only relevant with respect to the original conception of digital civic space as described in Chapter 4, but curation is valuable even with respect to less formal sites. The council participants repeatedly looked to this as a way of 'controlling' participation while the respondents who acknowledged that it was not possible to control the online conversation, believed that this lack of control is a barrier to meaningful participation online because of the perceived levels of risk that it poses to the council. This is another aspect of the digital civic space that challenges its actual implementation, but needs to be resolved if we are to see on-going interaction between the informal civic and formal democratic spheres.

7.3 What next?

The last section suggests some immediate actions that could be taken by policy makers in response to the ideas outlined in this thesis. These are all based on the evidence that social media, in the context of democratic engagement, should not be framed as eParticipation or journalism, but as a byproduct of people living their lives in a digital way in the emergent Network Society. The shift towards this Network Society and the take up of these tools is not yet comprehensive and one

reason for urgency on the part of policy makers is the fact that at the changes in technology are outpacing the reaction to the social changes this is causing within government. Government (as opposed to politics) can be said to exist to preserve the status quo; thus, it is not surprising that it is being slow to react to these changes. However, there are many pressures on our system of government that make it increasingly fragile in the face of external change. In a context of radical shifts in the nature of society, government must move faster if it is to remain relevant to the public it serves. The next section outlines some ways in which the work of this thesis could be extended in order to explore this further.

7.3.1 Communities of interest

The focus of this research on local government means that the thesis primarily examines communities of place rather than communities of interest. This was a pragmatic choice as communities of place were seen as resonating with the current way that local government is structured thereby constituting a good starting point for addressing the question of democratic deficit. However, in the context of the online world, geography is less relevant and, in many instances, communities of interest on line are more established than communities of place on line, which have only recently reached large enough participant numbers to be meaningful. An examination of communities of interest and their potential for engagement with the democratic process would be a useful next step to further test how digital civic space might better support the democratic process.

An experiment along these lines is currently being undertaken by NHS England in order to support the governance arrangements as a result of the 2011 Health

Act. NHS Citizen⁶² is an 18-month programme (October 2013-March 2015) intended to design a new system of accountability and decision making for the NHS England board. The design is still being developed and is subject to change; however, the four essential elements, or spaces' which it contains seem to have been widely accepted:

NHS Citizen System model version 2

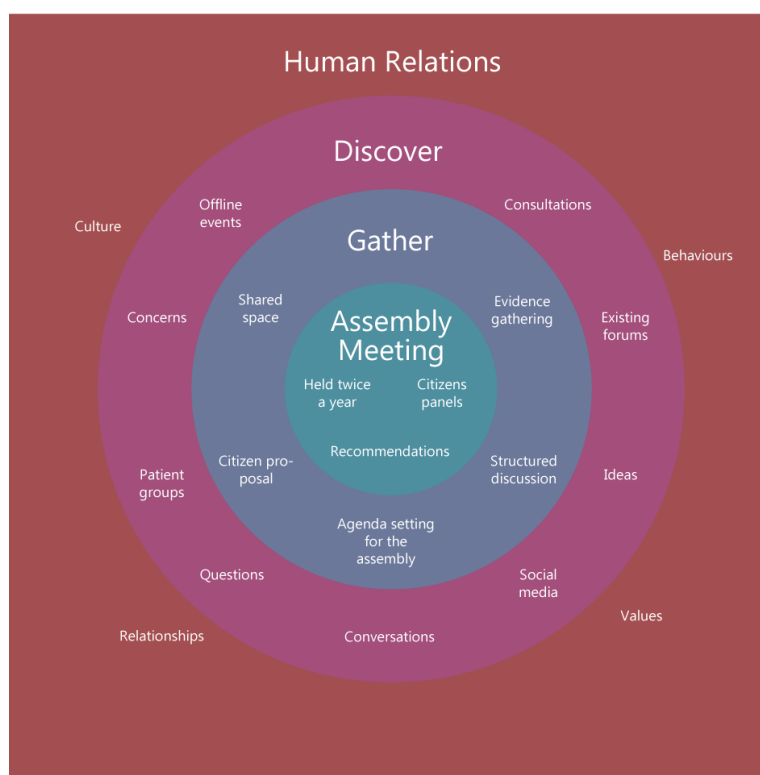


Figure 7.1: NHS Citizen model

The 'discover' space is designed with respect to the principles of civic space outlined in this thesis (the programme is being developed for NHS England by a group of organisations including my employer Public-i) and, as a result, should provide a wide scale test of these in the context of communities of interest - in this case different service users within NHS England's commissioning scope - rather

⁶² <http://www.nhscitizen.org.uk> captured 16.03.14.

than communities of place. This is an opportunity to further test and develop some of the ideas proposed in this thesis. Further information on the programme can be found on the project website along with much of the design material for the programme.

7.3.2 Scale

This research looked at relatively small levels of activity. A focus on the hyperlocal level shows that active localities count civic creators in the hundreds rather than the thousands. So, what would be the results a similar examination on a much broader scale? If successful, the NHS Citizen programme will need to accommodate tens of thousands of participants.

It would be fairly straightforward technically to use social media monitoring software⁶³ to test the public mood with respect to various issues within the NHS ecosystem, and present these back to the Board as ‘evidence’. However, this information would not represent active (or knowing) participation of the content creators and, as a result, would not be informative for a deliberative decision making process. This kind of monitoring does not meet any of the conditions of digital civic space discussed in this thesis. The approach taken by NHS Citizen is the first national attempt to identify active civic creators (online and offline) and to create an infrastructure that would connect them within a network of networks. The problem for NHS Citizen and other similar projects, will be to ‘listen’

⁶³ Social media monitoring refers to the software designed for aggregate capture and analysis of social media content.

selectively to this network - which could be described as having opted in to the process since participants will be invited to participate. The second problem will be to summarize and 'playback' some of the insights gained from this selective listening, to meet the criteria of openness described in the design.

The amount of data that will be generated within this network, and across similar space constructed around a locality, will not be intelligible without the use of analytical tools generally associated with 'big data'.⁶⁴ There is growing public unease with government use of big data and how digital technologies are used as intelligence gathering tools, as evidenced by public reaction to events such as Wikileaks. Despite its choosing to use these tools the public does not trust the way in which government is using its data as shown by the postponed roll out of the care.data programme in February 2014.⁶⁵

The question of scale and how we might utilise digital civic space to enable government to make use of 'big data' while building rather than damaging public trust, require further research.

⁶⁴ Big data is the term used to refer to the analysis of large and complex datasets or collections of data sets

⁶⁵ In January 2014 NHS England announced an initiative called care-data which was intended to enable sharing of patient data stored with GPs, with researchers and other service improvers. Public outcry at the nature of the proposed programme and the limited information provided about it resulted in its being put on hold for 6 months.

7.3.3 Limitations of the online environment

A personal learning point from this work is the need continually to treat online activity as only part of the solution with respect to how digital civic space might help address the democratic deficit. Firstly, as Castells (Castells, 2012) describes in his book *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, shared spaces exist both online and offline. My research related to digital civic space shows that within local communities citizens are using digital tools to create new networked spaces also within their offline communities.

There is a continuing problem of lack of universal access to the Internet. Chapter 6, Section 6.3.6 introduced a discussion about digital exclusion and its close correlation with other forms of deprivation. While this situation persists, the online environment cannot be the only location for citizens' democratic participation.

We are not at the point when an entirely online existence is being contemplated – it is still the subject of science fiction rather than fact. It seems not only likely but inevitable that our future society will continue to span online and offline space which means the democratic process must also do so. However, this blend of online and offline should be exactly that – a blend – rather than a replication of offline interactions online. Both environments have something to contribute to our future democracy and should be considered in parallel.

7.3.4 Evolving the role of elected representative

The role of elected representative is also affected by online and offline behaviours. One of the issues frequently mentioned by the both civic creators and council officers to whom we spoke as part of this research, was the lack of skills in elected representatives - in this case, local councillors. This was not an area that was examined in this research; however, the absence of local councillors from the results of the social media audits was striking, and the numbers of local councillors online and active is small although beginning to change. In my work as a practitioner I spend a lot of time working with locally elected representatives, and have been involved in designing council personal development programmes which highlight lack of online social skills rather than lack of technical support, which is a more important problem. The 'networked councillor' programme is as response to this and is starting to explore the skills that councillors need in order to be effective online⁶⁶ rather than simply teaching technical skills.

This issue is unlikely to be 'solved' in the short term simply by addressing a skills gap; the nature of the relationship between representatives and represented would be fundamentally altered if there were constant two-way (or even multi-way) dialogue. Coleman's suggestion of 'direct representation' reflects the context of the Network Society and its highly connected nature. Rather than replacing elected representative's functions, the Network Society might serve to reconnect citizens with those who represent them. However, this will happen only if those representatives are able to engage effectively online, something that very few of them were doing at the time of writing.

⁶⁶ <http://networkedcouncillor.wordpress.com> captured 16.04.14.

This is another area where further research would be valuable to further understand the skills needed to be an effective representative in the Network Society, and to explore what models of representation might be most effective in the future.

7.3.5 Networked democracy?

Throughout this work I have argued that community engagement, if considered as separate to political engagement, can be said to weaken rather than strengthen democratic participation. It can be described as another form of context collapse where civic and political identities are brought together. Further, as Coleman (Coleman, 2005b) argues, the introduction of new digital and mediated technologies creates the opportunity for a more direct form of representation that does not need the mediation provided by traditional media between the public and the politicians. We are at the start of a process of understanding what that might mean, and there are few tools or structures available to help to support this form of representation.

The proposal for digital civic space is intended to be part of the answer to the question of what infrastructure is needed to support forms of representation and democracy suitable for a digital and network age. By creating or supporting networks of citizens that reflect both place and topic, we might create an environment that supports what Coleman describes as ‘direct representation’ with citizens feeling directly connected to their representatives.

However, there are vulnerabilities in this model with respect to scale, not just in terms of the volumes of content, but also volumes of relationships – how many direct relationships can a politician realistically be able to support, and what infrastructure will be needed to enact this?

As a further development of this thinking, and against the structural context of a digital civic space, I believe there is potential to explore a model of democracy with the following additional qualities:

- the ability to apply different democratic decision making models within different stages or places in the system comprising civil society, democracy and bureaucracy. This might consist of a democratic model that offers the opportunity for more participatory democracy within the hyperlocal context, for example, but embeds deliberative and representative approaches for more complex decisions;
- the bureaucracy needed to support this system of government would be designed to support agile decision making and be responsive to persistent feedback;
- this model would apply within other structures and not simply our formal democratic institutions – for example, within bodies such as NHS England which is part of the state, but not directly democratically governed.

There are other cultural and social drivers which I believe need to be accommodated in our democratic model, for example, a desire for greater levels of openness and access to information (these are both qualities I have suggested as

being design elements of digital civic space). I would tentatively propose the system be described as one of 'networked democracy'.

The question of scale, which I touched on earlier, is one of the key issues that make a new model necessary, and which I believe has not been addressed adequately in the literature. We have created a democratic hierarchy in which our elected representatives cannot have a meaningful relationship with the full range of people that they represent. In a more digital and networked world, public opinion will be both more granular and more 'knowable' and, if we get the balance between surveillance and participation right, this would be a major democratic asset and a driver of democratic change. Members of the public, not unreasonably, wants elected representatives to listen to them and not to the national newspapers. Scale is important because what works for 4,500 people may not work for 45,000 and we should build in the flexibility needed to enable meaningful participation at all scales.

There is a need to develop trust throughout the whole system of democracy. Trust is involved in surrendering one's interests to the common good – in many ways democracy ensures that this trust is balanced. This goes back to Hobbes who asked what conditions need to be in place to make this trust possible. However, I am not sure that the rationality that he expected people to bring to this choice really expresses the personal nature of trust. This points to the need to feel connected to our representatives – as members of the Network Society we seek to connect to individuals not institutions.

I believe that this is a model of democracy that could be both tested and developed from the ground up – it is not a top down system of government, but instead could be experimented with in hyperlocal and local contexts. It is also closely linked to the thinking in the NHS Citizen programme, and reflects the challenges being faced by other parts of the public sector, for example, the police, as they struggle to better connect with citizens.

To conclude, I suggest we need to move forward in small, manageable steps – perhaps by considering not perfect democracy, but enough democracy – a minimum viable product, if you like. In a complex world it is realistic to aspire to making many experiences, government, corporate and civil, *slightly* more democratic, rather than simply focusing on making institutions such as parliament *much* more democratic.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis has explored whether the informal and civic use of networked technologies by citizens might form some kind of response to the problem of democratic deficit, and extended this to suggesting the need to create digital civic spaces. Consideration was given specifically to the current state of local government in the UK and the acknowledged democratic deficit, and the nature of traditional decision-making processes which increasingly are failing to be relevant to community participants. The research described in this thesis provides evidence of communities coming together online and organizing politically, but little evidence of these communities connecting with the formal democratic process. This will need additional measures such as those outlined in Chapter 4, which discussed a proposed design for digital civic space.

One way to address this gap is to consider how our democratic processes might be reformed in order to accommodate these changes. For example, we considered a different model of democracy, networked democracy, which might better reflect the flexibility and fluidity of the community while also reducing the time needed to participate formally. It has been argued that the process of priming and framing debate is an earlier, but equally essential element of the agenda setting (Scheufele, 2009) and we could, for example, consider adopting more iterative decision-making processes that allow for on-going negotiation of context and content, to enable people to have impact through more flexible participation. There are many similar changes that might be considered in order to bring our process of representation more in line with the way the public is choosing to participate, and some of these changes were outlined in Chapter 7.

Spending leisure time in a passive way is a relatively recent feature of our lives (Postman, 1985; Shirky, 2010) and, while there is evidence of more active use of leisure time described by Jenkins as participatory culture, it is not possible to say whether these more active behaviours will become the cultural norm. Civic participation online can be described as part of this participatory culture, but it is possible to predict whether this will continue to grow or whether it is a phase of online cultural development that will fade away, like bulletin boards and list serves.

If what we are experiencing is indeed the development of a Network Society, the fact that the resultant technologies are designed to put the tools of contribution and distribution in the hands of the public may serve to ensure that citizens will begin and continue to use these tools to connect to their communities. As connectivity increases and the use of smartphones and other augmented reality devices become ubiquitous, we could start to see technology use becoming even more embedded within our communities with civic use becoming just a part of this phenomenon.

The degree to which the technology affects the nature of the networks formed also needs to be taken into account when considering the future use of Digital civic spaces to increase democratic participation. During the period of writing up this thesis Google launched its Google+ service, Facebook began the process of launching its own email service and Apple launched its new iCloud service. All of these developments have the potential to disrupt the current social media space and to challenge the current dominance of Facebook. The technology will continue

to evolve and if, as is suggested in this thesis, digital civic space should be persistent then the civic sites that are being created on these commercial platforms may naturally, at some point, come together to create a complete narrative of place rather than isolated and separate networks. This is an argument for some kind of intervention. Multiple representations of a single location online only add to the 'noise' around the online space and, if we want to encourage the listening style of government described by Coleman (Coleman, 2005b), then it will be necessary to ensure that the environment is producing an articulate and understandable output. These multiple representations risk creating competing and contradictory narratives for places which necessarily take no account of one another.

Communicating with the community in which the civic content creator lives may not be the only effect of or intention of the work of these individuals on hyperlocal and other websites. The civic content creators I spoke to were clear about their desire to contribute to their communities within the scope of motivation for their activity which might be to promote their business, support a specific cause or just practice their skills. Motivations are rarely singular and we should perhaps be happy that civic conversation can be seen as much as a positive byproduct as an intended consequence.

The research described here has been largely formative in that it has opened up some possibilities for future study by outlining the potential for actively engineered digital civic space as a possible solution to the problem of democratic deficit. The most appropriate approach to creating this space needs further

research, as does the potential role of civic creators in this process. These areas have been only briefly discussed in this thesis. The social media audit process could be developed further in order to get a better indication of the volume of informal civic participation that could reasonably be expected in an area, as opposed to simply achieving a minimum threshold.

The initial conception of digital civic space in order to support democratic engagement is still valid and useful, and the intent of experiment one - the Virtual Town Hall – is still valid. The experience of this research indicates that that this space is created needs to be fundamentally different from how it was conceived in the original Virtual Town Hall project and to take account of the fact that citizens can and will create spaces for themselves and will not wait for government to do it for them. A digital civic space needs to reflect the cultural values of the social web and the Network Society which means that they need to encompass the values of openness, transparency and co-production. Arguably these cultural values will need also to be reflected in the institutions of government that are working with citizens. It is not possible to conceive of such a space being built without substantial changes to the way that our democracy currently works. It will need an attentive government and the more conversational politicians proposed by Coleman for this idea to become a reality.

This thesis has argued that new infrastructure will be needed if we are to debate our digital choices and infrastructure with the qualities of digital civic space with no underlying commercial imperative in its design. Civic spaces, by definition, are not democratic. The proposal in this thesis is that government should create an

online environment in which community created civic spaces will be central, but which will address the requirement to provide a means to connect these spaces to the decision-making process. Chapter 7 discussed how these decision making processes might need to change to reflect way that civic participation online could better connect with the democratic model.

The balance will be a delicate one - digital civic spaces are part of the public sphere, not part of the democratic process, and the openness and publicity of these spaces online should allow us to move seamlessly between these two states. We need to value and preserve the freedom of the public sphere at the same time as preserving accountability of the democratic process. We do not have the luxury of time if we want to take advantage of the way in which online participation could positively affect democratic participation. The Network Society is moving online and the social web has become a significant part of many of those living in developed countries. It is playing an increasingly role worldwide. We will need to reconcile the issue of democracy online in a way that works within this new context if we want to ensure ability to use this new realm to enhance our democracy. The proposal here is that this should include creating appropriate spaces online as well as reexamining the democratic model.

In our physical world, government takes responsibility for the infrastructure - not just utilities and roads but also a planning system that tries to ensure that the built environment reflects people's needs and values. We build buildings to house our democratic bodies and to accommodate the relationship between citizen and state. Currently, communities are building that architecture for themselves online and

doing it using commercial tools which do not require democratic outcomes or even slightly democratic effects. Since increasingly aspects of our lives are being lived largely online, I suggest that our democratic institutions should take an active role in shaping this environment at least to the same extent that they do offline.

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